

11

ようこそ**実力至上主義**の**教室**へ

衣笠彰梧 × トモセシユンサク

しのはら
篠原さつき

1年Cクラス、バレー部。入学当初は池とぶつかることが多かったが、現在二人の関係には進展がありそうな雰囲気。



いけ かんじ
池寛治

1年Cクラス、帰宅部。数々の試験を乗り越え、大きな成長が見られる。

すどう けん
須藤健

1年Cクラス、バスケット部。入学時は感情を制御できず問題行動が多かったが、現在はかなり落ち着いた様子。





さかやなぎあり す
坂柳有栖

「……龍園くん？」

どうして……ここに……」

明らかな動揺が一之瀬に走っただろう。
いや、オレも坂柳もこの想定はしていなかった。



「どうした。
何を動揺してる」



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

VOLUME 11

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: THE MONOLOGUE OF SAKAYANAGI ARISU

[CHAPTER 1: THE TEACHERS' BATTLE](#)

[CHAPTER 2: THE FIRST YEARS' FINAL BATTLE](#)

[CHAPTER 3: OPPONENTS](#)

[CHAPTER 4: WHAT THE CLASS LACKS](#)

[CHAPTER 5: A TRAP, A HOME-COOKED MEAL, AND A FAVOR](#)

[CHAPTER 6: A MAN'S TEARS](#)

[CHAPTER 7: AYANOKŌJI VS. SAKAYANAGI](#)

[CHAPTER 8: CLASS B VS. CLASS D](#)

EPILOGUE: THE LINE BETWEEN THE WINNER AND THE LOSER

PROLOGUE

THE MONOLOGUE OF SAKAYANAGI ARISU

I could still recall the scene across the glass screen on that day as if it had occurred only yesterday.

My father took me to a facility located deep within the mountains, its exterior dyed a pure white. No, it wasn't only the exterior.

As far as I could remember, both the corridors and the small rooms we went through were all painted in one single white color.

I placed both my hands on the transparent glass, doing my very best to see what lied beyond. The screen seemed to be some sort of one-way mirror so they couldn't see us from the other side.

“What is it, Arisu? It's rare to see you this interested in something.”

“This is an experiment attempting to artificially create a genius. There's no way I wouldn't find it interesting.”

“...That's not a very childlike way of speaking, as usual.”

My father spoke, showing a perplexed smile as he picked me up in his arms.

According to my father, anyone who went through the curriculum of this facility would, without exception, be educated to become someone exceptional. There's no way I wouldn't have misgivings about that.

“It’s just, this experiment seems to have a lot of troublesome elements to it.”

“Which means?”

“It seems to be attacked from all sides from a human rights perspective.”

“Ha, haha...”

“More importantly, I don’t think it is possible for them to create artificial geniuses or anything like that.”

The moment people are born into this world, the moment they receive life, their potential is set in stone. It was all the luck of the draw. Then, it would sometimes manifest in various fields. That was the truth of the human world.

They can’t do more than what is carved into their DNA. They awaken by the blood passed on from ancestors or by a sudden mutation. In other words, if you want to create a genius, you’d have to do it at the genetic level.

People who are born ordinary will never escape the realm of the ordinary. No matter how blessed their environment is, if somebody isn’t excellent from the beginning, they won’t become a genius. That had been my belief since I was young.

That was the conclusion I had reached after seeing my fellow classmates receive a top-quality education ever since I was an infant. That’s why this experiment ran counter to my own way of thinking. That being said... I could agree that it wasn’t so straightforward that DNA alone could explain all of it either.

“Even if someone graduates from this facility as the cream of the crop, will that truly be because of this experiment?”

“What makes you ask that?”

“The children at the top will just have the superior DNA, is what I think.”

“I see. The curriculum these children are partaking is quite intense indeed. As you’ve said, there is a chance the remaining victors were all excellent from the very beginning. You really are just as wise as your mother. Personality included.”

“That makes me happy. Being compared to my mother is the highest form of praise.”

I obediently and honestly took my father’s words to heart and yet again continued to watch the children on the other side of the mirror. Children with talent, children without, everyone was partaking in this education program equally. It was a program where the people who start to fall behind would disappear one by one.

“Ultimately, even if there are children who survive until the end, they are just blessed by their parents’ talents.”

Even if I found it interesting, I couldn’t help but feel like it was a meaningless experiment.

“Who knows, it may be so, it may not be so. I don’t know either. But I can’t throw away the possibility that these children may be destined to carry our future.”

Me being the child I was, I didn’t understand what my father’s acquaintance was trying to accomplish. My sight turned back to what was reflected beyond the glass.

“—That child, seems to have solved those tasks calmly and without any difficulties for a while now.”

When it came to accomplishing the tasks presented to them, every child reflected in our eyes succeeded. However, they were desperate. It was obvious that doing so took all the effort they could muster. Whether it was studying or sports, the level of the competition here was far beyond that of a normal child. And yet, amongst them was a single existence exhibiting abnormality.

A certain boy was playing chess and overwhelmingly defeating his opponents, one after the next. Among the children I could see beyond the glass, he was the only existence snatching away my gaze and heart. Seeing this, my father looked somewhat happy yet somewhat sad as he nodded.

“Yes, he is Sensei’s son. His name should be... Ayanokōji... Kiyotaka if I remember correctly.”

Sensei was my father’s acquaintance and the person running this facility. He was a person who never yields to anyone, and I remember my father always showed a modest attitude when he was around.

“He’s Sensei’s child so his DNA must be excellent, right?”

“Who knows. At least, Sensei has never graduated from a top university or possessed outstanding athleticism. His wife is also an ordinary woman. Their parents never showed signs of any talents either. But, Sensei has stronger ambitions than anyone and an unyielding and indomitable fighting spirit, that’s it. That’s why he has become so great. To the extent that he, at one point in time, could move the country.”

“In that case— won’t that child be the perfect specimen for this experiment?”

My father nodded with conflicting feelings at my question.

“Well... I think his father would probably feel like that child is perfect for it. But... as I see it, I can't help but feel sorry for him.”

“Why is that?”

“From the very moment he was born, he has lived within these facilities. For him, the first thing he saw wasn't his mother nor his father, but the plain white ceiling of this facility. If he had fallen behind earlier, he could've probably lived with his father. Or no, maybe the fact that he continues to stay here had gotten him his father's favor. If so, that's very...”

Simply put, he hadn't ever received any love from his parents. How lonely and desolate such a life must be. His talents aside, there was still a lot to gain and learn through physical contact with other people. I strongly hugged my beloved father, to which he hugged me back.

“The final goal for this facility is for every educated child to become geniuses. But it's still in the test phase. It will continue to struggle for another 50 or 100 years. It's not to make the children gathered here to exhibit talent when they become adults, but to provide the foundation for future generations. Both those surviving and those falling behind were nothing more than a batch of samples.”

A life of confinement within this facility, only to have their existence added to some database somewhere.

My father's face as he said those words looked like he was in pain.

“Do you not like this place, Father?”

“Hmm? ...Who knows? ...I honestly can’t cheer it on. If the children here really become superior to everyone else, if this facility becomes the natural thing, then this must just be the misfortunate beginning. That’s what I think.”

“Rest assured. I will personally smash it for you. I will prove that talent is not decided by education, but from the moment people are born.”

I cannot lose to the children raised at this facility no matter what and no matter how many. I, who has inherited superior DNA, have to stop it.

“Yes, I’m expecting lots of you, Arisu.”

“By the way father. I think I want to start playing chess—”

I opened my eyes and sat up still half-asleep.

“What a nostalgic dream...”

It was perhaps due to the approaching confrontation. To think I was remembering that day. But from the moment I met you until now, I’ve never forgotten it. I was convinced that a day would come when I would meet you again face-to-face.

1

THE TEACHERS' BATTLE

On a certain day in February, a little before the provisional Class Vote special exam had been officially announced...

The faculty of Advanced Nurturing High School were continuously busy with their work.

They were preparing everything for the upcoming promotions, expulsions, and graduation of their students.

Additionally, they were also preparing the final special exams for the entire student body.

It was a busy time where they were constantly swamped with work.

None of the teachers had the freedom to do anything but devote themselves to their work, day after day.

However, the teachers in charge of the first-year students had much more on their minds than their colleagues.

“That should wrap everything up regarding the details of the first-years’ final special exam, as well as the incorporation of the new system we’ll be putting in place.”

A lone man finished up his explanation on the final special exam of the year in front of all of the staff members.

When it came to the second and third-year students, the explanation hadn't been too different from usual. However, that wasn't true for the first-years.

"If there are any questions, please feel free to ask."

Within this tense, biting atmosphere, the man looked around at each of the teachers who were listening carefully.

The silence lasted for several seconds.

"If I may, Acting Director Tsukishiro."

With a raise of the hand, first-year Class A's homeroom teacher, Mashima, broke the silence that had been enshrouding the staff room.

Both Chabashira and Hoshinomiya, homeroom teachers of the same grade, turned their gaze toward Mashima as well.

The man, Acting Director Tsukishiro, had already noticed that many of the first-year homeroom teachers were harboring doubts about his plan. Rather, he thought that it would've been unreasonable if they hadn't seemed at least a little doubtful.

Tsukishiro was assessing their value as human beings.

He wanted to see whether or not they were mere working members of society. Whether or not they were the kind of teachers who only cared about their own paychecks.

"What do you want to say, Mashima-sensei?"

Having already anticipated Mashima's question, Tsukishiro let show a smile.

“While the special exams for the second and third years are just as difficult as they had been in previous years, the special exam for the first years is far more difficult than usual. There’s a huge risk that there will be expulsions because of this ‘Class Vote’ provisional exam...”

As a teacher in charge of first-year students and for the sake of the future of the children, Mashima spoke out against Tsukishiro, unafraid of his title as the Acting Director of the school. And without waiting for a response, he continued to protest.

“Forgive my rudeness, Acting Director, but you’ve only just recently been appointed to your post at this school. Although I understand you’ve made this decision based on everything that has happened so far, I think it’s somewhat inappropriate for us to do something that will force expulsions just because there haven’t been any amongst the first-years yet.”

Apparently amused by Mashima’s question... or rather, Mashima’s protests, Tsukishiro grinned with a white, toothy smile.

“A huge risk that there will be expulsions, is it? Haven’t the students had to fear expulsion during every special exam so far? The rules of this school state that receiving just one failing mark would result in expulsion, right? I don’t think an ordinary high school would have such a strict system in place.”

“I’m talking about how unreasonable it is. Indeed, students who are unable to reach a certain threshold are expelled. That system isn’t meant to be lenient. Truth be told, that very system has been getting numerous students expelled every year.”

This school holds various special exams every year, all while keeping them within an acceptable range of difficulty.

Staying within those limits, this current batch of first-year students had nearly made it through the whole year without any expulsions. It's unclear whether or not it's because their level of prowess is different than that of the other school years, but there must be a reason why they've managed to come so far without losing anyone. To Mashima, it's important to take advantage of that prowess and help facilitate it for as long as possible.

To Tsukishiro, however, it was different.

"If it's just about getting numerous students expelled, then wouldn't this exam do the same thing?"

"No. This provisional exam is obviously different than the policies we've had up until now. I cannot approve of something that practically forces expulsions."

All by himself, Mashima stubbornly refused to back down, while the rest of the teachers simply remained silent.

"Besides, you abruptly decided to introduce an entirely new system for the final special exam of the year. Something like this has never happened before, and you've never given us any reason for it either."

Mashima's resistance was futile. The teachers had known this from the very beginning.

It would be impossible to overturn the decision. It simply couldn't be changed.

“It seems that Mashima-sensei’s way of thinking is a little old-fashioned. Have you never considered the possibility that the way things had been done up until now was wrong?”

From within the staff room, the back-and-forth between Tsukishiro and Mashima continued to repeat itself. However, it was painfully obvious that Mashima was at a disadvantage. As a mere teacher, he was simply no match for Tsukishiro.

“Younger children absorb information far better than most adults would think. With that in mind, I decided against having the second and third-year students participate, narrowing down the focus of the exam to only the first-year students. After all, the first-years still haven’t been completely tainted by the school yet. If this new system ends up being successful, it’ll be easy to test it on the incoming first-year students in the future as well.”

“These first-years have gotten this far without any expulsions. Do you really want to put an end to it, just like that?”

“How well they do in the short-term is meaningless. It’s about how well they do in the future. Let’s stay future-oriented.”

Tsukishiro rebuked Mashima once again before proceeding to continue his point.

“The government has great expectations for this school. It’s a new school where experimental ventures have been taking place, and its history is still shallow. That’s why I think we should be willing to try all sorts of things.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being future-oriented. However, it seems to me that you’re treating the current batch of first-years like guinea pigs. As a homeroom teacher, that is something I simply cannot approve of.”

Mashima continued to challenge Tsukishiro head-on, trying every means at his disposal to change the direction the special exams were going in.

But, the implementation of the Class Vote provisional exam had already been decided. It was probably impossible for Mashima to stop it now.

“...Mashima-sensei, that’s enough.”

Fully aware of how futile his actions were, Chabashira finally intervened after Mashima had almost reached a stopping point.

For a moment, Mashima swallowed the words that were about to come pouring out.

However, the one to press the matter again was none other than Tsukishiro himself.

“It’s not a problem. If you have something to say, I’d like to hear all of it. After all, I can understand the anxiety all you teachers must be feeling right now after all. Isn’t that right, Mashima-sensei?”

“Then, by any chance, could you at least reconsider it?”

Mashima asked Tsukishiro if he would reconsider the provisional special exam.

It seemed as if Tsukishiro was offering a lifeline, but that wasn’t the case.

Unlike Chairman Sakayanagi, Acting Director Tsukishiro didn’t have the slightest intention of listening to the teacher’s opinions.

“Reconsider? It’s not that simple. While it may be temporary, I am the director here. That is to say, even though the director holds the responsibility of determining the policies and guidelines at this school, the director is still just a

puppet. That said, I'm nothing more than someone who was expressly sent here by an even higher corporate body backed by the government."

With those words, Mashima's show of resistance quickly amounted to nothing.

Tsukishiro had made it clear that their opinions came second. The future of Advanced Nurturing High School came first and foremost.

"So you're saying it doesn't matter if students are expelled one after another because of these strict rules?"

"Those who don't adapt will be eliminated. That is how society works... no, that is the providence of nature itself. Besides, haven't we already compromised by allowing the incorporation of protection points? You should be satisfied enough with that, right?"

The tense atmosphere gradually began to calm down.

The slow-paced morning meeting was also drawing to a close.

"All things considered, the current Chairman, Mr. Sakayanagi, has been placed under house arrest due to suspicions over improper conduct. If that does happen to be the case, I simply can't inherit education policies that had been established by that kind of person. Of course, I do hope that he'll be cleared of all suspicions and be returned to his position as soon as possible, but..."

With a single clap of the hands, Tsukishiro quickly looked around at each of the teachers.

"Time's almost up, so let's leave things off here. Oh, that reminds me. I've been looking into whether or not our school can hold a cultural festival next year. I'm

thinking I'd like to hear all of your opinions about that, so I look forward to hearing back from all of you when that time comes."

"A cultural festival? As a matter of principle, we should be hesitant to do anything that would involve opening up the school to the outside world..."

This time, doubts arose from the homeroom teachers for the second and third-year students as well.

"That old-fashioned way of thinking is quite problematic. I believe that, in order for us to become a more nationally recognized school, the school needs to undergo change as many times as necessary. Naturally, we'll have to carefully select who we'll invite inside, but there's no need to worry about that. We won't open the school to the general public, instead, after a strict selection process, the school would only be opened up to those who are well-acquainted with the way the school works, like politicians. This way, information about us won't leak out into the outside world too excessively. In any case, I'd like for all of us to explore the opportunity with an open mind. You're all dismissed."

Just like that, Acting Director Tsukishiro wrapped up the meeting. The teachers' battle had come to its end, and the teachers were powerless to do anything about it.

Part 1

After Tsukishiro had left the staff room and before classes had begun for the day...

“Mashima-sensei, Hoshinomiya-sensei. I’d like to borrow the two of you for a bit.”

Chabashira called out to her two fellow teachers. They were both friends and rivals who, in the past, had competed against each other at this very school.

Having known each other for a long time, the two of them gathered their important documents and followed Chabashira out of the staff room without asking any questions. They walked down the hallway together as they headed to where the students would be waiting for them.

“It’s depressing, isn’t it? We have to announce an exam where someone’s gonna get expelled.”

Hoshinomiya was the first one to break the ice.

With a deep sigh, her gaze fell upon the attendance record.

“I wonder who’s gonna disappear...”

Even though it wasn’t easy, Hoshinomiya was still trying to face the facts.

“I’m not sure someone will. There aren’t very many ways around it, but they still have some options.”

“You mean, overriding the expulsion with twenty million points, right?”

Despite saying this, Hoshinomiya was also well aware of the reality of the situation.

As things stood, none of the classes had that many points.

“If there’s a bright side, I guess it’s nice that they don’t have to pay 300 class points as well. Forced expulsions are something they’re still experimenting with. That might be obvious though.”

It would usually cost twenty million private points as well as 300 class points to override an expulsion, but this time, the class points were exempted from that.

Although, that alone wasn’t enough to sway the students and teachers into accepting the mandatory expulsions.

“In any case, I can’t help but feel dissatisfied about Acting Director Tsukishiro’s way of doing things.”

“Well, you’re not alone on that, Sae-chan. He just popped up out of nowhere and, like, started doing whatever super unreasonable thing he wanted, didn’t he?”

Hoshinomiya snuggled up to Chabashira as if she was clinging onto her, only to get pushed away with an annoyed expression.

“Complaining isn’t going to change anything. If you say too much, your neck will fly.”

“Are you really one to say that to us, Mashima-kun? You were really going at it with the Acting Director yourself. It made me super-duper nervous. And after all that, you’re saying we can’t do the same?”

“Chie is right. That man could fire the teachers for all he cares. He probably knows there’s always plenty of replacements. In fact, that’s probably what he wants.”

“Maybe he plans to get rid of the teachers who oppose him, like Mashima-kun, and then hire new ones who are more convenient to him.”

Chabashira and Hoshinomiya were considering the idea that Tsukishiro’s speech in the staff room might’ve been a plot to weed out the teachers who oppose him.

Mashima didn’t disagree with the idea either.

“You too, Sae-chan. You went through so much to reach Class C, so don’t go doing anything crazy, ‘kay?’”

“You seem pretty calm even though we’ve started to close the gap.”

“No way... Sae-chan, you’re not fantasizing that your class might make it all the way to Class A, are you?”

Hoshinomiya stared at Chabashira with peering, round eyes, forcing Chabashira to turn and look away.

While Hoshinomiya had a habit of absentmindedly saying things sometimes, in most cases, her words had actually been carefully calculated.

Having been acquainted with her for such a long time, Chabashira knew about this tendency of hers all too well.

“...No. Even I’m not that foolish.”

“Oh good. If you had said yes... that’d have been like, way too much for me!”

Hoshinomiya playfully waved her hands in front of her, acting like she had been overcome with surprise.

Mashima couldn't stand listening to their silly conversation any longer.

They were like carnivores facing off against each other on the savannah. Only one would come out on top.

“Are you two still fussing over what happened back then? How many years need to pass bef—”

“Mashima-kun. The amount of time that's passed has nothing to do with it.”

“She's right. It's completely irrelevant.”

Although Mashima tried cutting in to mediate, the two of them quickly glared him down and forced him to back off.

Even though Mashima had boldly stood up to Tsukishiro, there were still some adversaries he wouldn't dare to confront.

“...I see. At any rate, I'm in no place to say anything here, but don't bring your personal feelings into these upcoming exams, okay?”

“We wouldn't do something like that. Right, Chie?”

“Of course not. Right, Sae-chan?”

Chabashira and Hoshinomiya were still trying to sound each other out, but on the surface, they glossed it over as though nothing had happened.

“Just refrain from doing anything careless, Chie. That's all I'm going to say.”

With that, Chabashira quickly wrapped up the conversation and walked away, headed off to Class C.

The two of them stood silently as she left.

“You aren’t really bringing your personal feelings into this, are you?”

Mashima spoke up as they watched Chabashira leave in a sour mood.

“Don’t lump me in with her, Mashima-kun. I’ve already gotten over any lingering attachments I had. But that girl hasn’t changed at all since back then. She’ll never be able to move past her days as a student. That’s why she’s still stuck up on that good-for-nothing first love of hers, but she would never admit to that.”

“...You’ve got a terrible look on your face.”

“Eh? No way. Do I really?”

Hoshinomiya then took out a folding mirror and made a sweet smile.

“Okie-dokie! I look super cute today too. Don’t you think so?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“How heartless! Well, whatever.”

As Hoshinomiya put away her mirror, Mashima offered her a piece of advice.

“Be careful not to have the carpet pulled out from under you. This year’s Class D... No, Class C is different from usual.”

While there was still a gap in class points, even the teachers wouldn’t be able to predict how the future special exams would play out.

“You may be right, but I’m not too worried since I have Ichinose-san on my side. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“If they seem like they’re getting close to reaching us, I’ll pummel them back down myself.”

“You wouldn’t poke your nose into a competition meant for the students would you?”

“I wouldn’t do anything like that. It’s just, I’m not gonna go easy on Sae-chan. I just wouldn’t want to interfere to the point where the teachers start to fight amongst themselves.”

“You sound serious.”

“That’s because I can’t afford to lose, especially to Sae-chan.”

Ever since their student days, that was just the type of relationship they had.

Both as friends, and as rivals.

2

THE FIRST YEARS' FINAL BATTLE

March 8th.

Within Class C, Chabashira would soon be announcing the final special exam of the year.

There were thirty-nine desks in the classroom.

There had been forty just a few days ago, but that had been taken for granted and now, one of them was gone.

This was because Yamauchi Haruki had been expelled.

It wasn't just Class C who had faced this. Manabe from Class D and Yahiko from Class A had been as well.

There was no doubt that these expulsions had left a mark on the entire first-year student body.

Any hopes that there might have been a way out had been completely shattered.

Before they could get past the shock and sorrow of everything that had happened, time continued to march forward.

At the sound of the bell, homeroom had begun for the day and Chabashira walked into the room.

The classroom was completely void of idle chatter.

“-Without any further ado, I will now announce the final special exam.”

Chabashira began explaining the details of the first year’s final special exam.

Just as I had predicted, nobody was willing to say anything about Yamauchi.

Ike and Sudō, his closest friends, were probably trying their best to come to terms with reality.

“We will be finishing off the year with one final special exam where you’ll be asked to show off a culmination of everything that you’ve learned up until now, including knowledge, physical ability, cooperation, and maybe even a little bit of luck. In short, all of you will need to demonstrate the full extent of your potential.”

Normally, Chabashira would’ve been flooded with a tidal wave of questions and complaints from Ike’s general direction.

However, Ike was just listening to her quietly.

Most likely, he was wary of the fact that he may very well be next in line for expulsion.

“The special exam is called the ‘Event Selection Exam’, an exam where each class will compete in terms of their comprehensive ability. The class you’ll be competing against will be decided in accordance with the rules, similar to how it was during the Paper Shuffle exam.”

The Event Selection Exam. I couldn’t help but wonder what this final special of the school year would be about.

“To start things off, I’ll use these cards to make the explanation easier for all of you to understand. There are ten white cards and a certain number of yellow ones, modeled after the number of students in the class.”

As she spoke, Chabashira attached each of the blank cards onto the blackboard and lined them up.

Each card was roughly the same size as a playing card. While the ten white cards had nothing written on them, each of the yellow cards seemed to have a student’s name written on them.

Altogether, forty-eight cards had been attached to the blackboard.

There was one less yellow card than there were students in our class. This seemed like it was probably going to be significant.

“To start things out, I’ll explain the purpose of these ten white cards. The lot of you’ll have to talk things out with one another and decide on ten events that you’d like to do, which you will write down on these cards.”

As soon as she said this, Ike let show a somewhat difficult expression.

Having noticed how he was struggling to avoid interrupting her explanation, Chabashira spoke up again, her words laced with amusement.

“If there’s something on your mind, why don’t you speak up?”

“N-no, it’s just... don’t you get angry at us when we interrupt you while you’re still talking?”

Ike was obviously feeling distraught over this.

“Either way, I just can’t get ahold of myself unless you get this nonsense off your chest.”

In the past, Chabashira would pretty much only take questions at the end, but this time, it seemed like she was fine with hearing him out halfway through.

Many of our classmates turned their attention toward him.

Although he was puzzled with her change in attitude, Ike proceeded to voice his doubts.

“Then, uhm... uhh... What did you mean by events, exactly?”

“Writing, Shogi, Playing Cards, Baseball... You’re free to write down any events you think you can win at. It’s also up to you to come up with the rules for how each event will play out.”

“Eh? We’re allowed to choose whatever we want?”

Despite the fact that she had said it was up to us to decide, it didn’t seem to be clicking with Ike and the others.

“While you’re allowed to choose what you want to choose, there are still some restrictions. For instance, if you were to choose an obscure contest or game that not many people are familiar with, nobody but the proposers would have any chance of winning. In addition, the rules of the event must also be fair and easy to understand. Therefore, after you’ve submitted your events, the school will judge whether or not they’re appropriate, and act as the final say in the matter.”

Certainly, most people would have no chances of winning if peculiar rules were implemented, or if they had chosen excessively obscure sports or games that would only favor a small set of dedicated enthusiasts.

That said, I still wondered if there was more to the restrictions on the rules than this.

“Additionally, the rules must have regulations to prevent neutral outcomes. In the game of Go, for example, if both sides have the same score from territory and enemy captures, the game ends in a draw. In which case, the white side, as a concession for being the player who went second, would be given an additional half-point and win the game. In Shogi, as another example, it may seem impossible for the game to end in a draw at first, but it does happen on rare occasions, like when both kings are positioned in their respective promotion zones. If this happens, the game is in a deadlock and the winner is the player with more pieces in play. You will be required to come up with detailed rules like these ahead of time. If you submit an event without including tiebreakers to prevent the potential neutral outcomes, then it will be rejected.”

Events that ensure somebody comes out on top, while also not being overly obscure.

Even though there were countless options to choose from, it seemed that, to some extent, it was restricted to stay within the scope of a student.

“Well, let’s try illustrating it using an easy-to-understand example. Ike. What are you good at? Anything’s fine, so just say it.”

“Uh... What am I good at...?”

Ike began to think, seemingly unable to come up with something on the spot.

“I-I guess I’m pretty good at stuff like rock-paper-scissors?”

After hearing such a ridiculous answer, the rest of the class was unable to hold back their laughter.

Nevertheless, Chabashira took it seriously and wrote ‘rock-paper-scissors’ on one of the white cards.

“Okay, so let’s suppose you chose rock-paper-scissors as one of the events.”

Not having expected that she would take his answer seriously, Ike and the rest of the class were left with dumbfounded expressions.

“So then, what are the rules?”

“Uhm... Best three out of five?”

Chabashira wrote Ike’s rule on the bottom of the card.

“The event is well-known, and the rules are clear and simple. There would be no reason for the school to reject it.”

“S-she had no problem with it...”

Although it was an event that came about from a sloppy answer, the school didn’t seem to have any problem with it.

“Now, just repeat this nine more times and you’ll be done.”

Chabashira picked up a piece of chalk and began writing on the blackboard.

“This is the schedule for the exam, which is also something important for you to keep in mind. It will be roughly divided into three phases.”

Special Exam

March 8th ▪ The special exam is announced, and the class matchups are finalized.

March 15th ▪ Event selection is finalized, and the opposing class's ten events are revealed along with their rules.

March 22nd ▪ The Event Selection Exam begins.

“B-But sensei, wouldn't it take way too long for us to compete over twenty events?”

“On the day of the exam, each class will narrow down their ten events to their top five choices and submit those. In other words, there will be ten events, not twenty.”

At this point, Horikita spoke up.

“So basically, five of the ten events are just bluffs... meant as false information for us to mislead our opponents?”

“I suppose the events can play that role too. Of the chosen ten events, seven of them will be randomly selected by an automated system prepared by the school. That's how it will work.”

Without denying anything, Chabashira confirmed Horikita's assertion.

Compared to previous special exams, it seemed as though this one will span over a longer period of time.

I could assume that they had chosen to hold seven events because they wanted to ensure that there was a tiebreaker.

Since there wouldn't be any draws, it led me to wonder if the winner would be decided by the first class to get four wins out of the seven events.

“Even if the outcome is decided before all the events happen, the exam will continue until the final event ends. This is because the outcome of each event will influence the change in class points. In other words, even if the winners and losers have been determined, the competition will continue until the very end. The deadline for getting your ten events finalized will be Sunday the 14th at the end of the day. Your events will need to be checked over by the school, so it would be safer for all of you to have each event checked as soon as you decide on it.”

“What happens if we don't manage to come up with ten events by the 14th?”

“If that happens, the school will fill in the gaps with pre-arranged events. That said, you shouldn't assume these ones will be favorable toward you. The events would probably end up doing more harm than good.”

It looked like we definitely needed to come up with all of our events, no matter what.

“Another important thing to note is that you're not allowed to submit the same event twice. Suppose you've submitted a soccer event that determines the outcome by best two out of three. If you try to submit another soccer event with different rules where the outcome is decided by a penalty kick, it will be rejected. I advise you to keep this in mind.”

“Is it possible for us to retract an event after we've submitted it?”

“That won’t be allowed.”

“Then... are there any restrictions on who, or how many times somebody can participate in the events on the day of the exam?”

“Certain portions of the rules you’ll have to follow will probably be difficult to understand with just a verbal explanation, so the school prepared this handout containing the specific details. Feel free to make copies of it afterward. It should have the answers you’re looking for, Horikita.”

It would’ve been nice if the school had prepared a copy for each of us, but it was possible that they hadn’t done so intentionally.

With a single copy, the entire class would have to gather together to look at it all at the same time.

In that way, it would likely end up sparking conversation amongst everyone.

“I already wrote this on the blackboard, but the ten events you end up choosing will be relayed to the opposing class on the 15th. After all, it’s hard to hold a fair competition if your opponents don’t know what kind of events and rules you chose.”

In other words, we had roughly one week to study, practice, formulate plans, and do any other preparation we might need.

It’s also quite likely that there will be a battle of trying to figure out the other class’s preferred events on the day of the exam.

“Also, after the exam on the 22nd finishes, you’ll have the 23rd off. After the graduation ceremony on the 24th and the closing ceremony on the 25th, you’ll be free to enjoy your spring break to your heart’s content.”

I figured that our motivation moving forward would be highly dependent on whether or not we ended up losing or winning.

At any rate, I was able to grasp the general idea of the Event Selection Exam.

However-

Based on Chabashira’s expression, there still seemed to be something important she hadn’t mentioned yet.

“There’s still another important part to this besides choosing the events. In order to properly manage such a large number of people, you’ll need to select somebody to play the role of commander. Bear in mind that this commander won’t be able to directly participate in the events.”

“Commander...?”

This seemed to be the reason why there were only thirty-eight yellow cards.

“It’s an important role for somebody that needs to be able to adapt on the fly. You can think of it as a supporting role that participates in every event, acting as a lifeline. For example, they can substitute for a missing player or solve difficult problems that arise. This isn’t just limited to sports either. The commander would be given the means to intervene with games like Shogi or Go as well.”

It wasn’t just about the foundational ability of the students. The contributions made by the commander were also important.

“How exactly the commander is involved in everything will also be up to you. Using rock-paper-scissors as an example... you can come up with rules like: ‘The commander can join in one time at their own discretion’ or ‘The commander can swap out the student participating in the match’. It’s up to you.”

This meant that interventions from the commanders would generally be allowed as long as they’re fair.

In something like baseball or soccer, giving the commander the ability to switch out the players would be like assigning them the role of head coach for the team.

Through all seven events, the involvement of the commander was probably going to be a major part of the entire exam.

“Commanders will be granted private points when the class emerges victorious, but at the same time, they’ll have to bear the consequences when the class faces defeat. Indeed, when a class loses, the commander will be held liable and be expelled from the school.”

It seemed like the loser would be forcibly expelled this time too.

“In this special exam, having a commander will be crucial. Moving forward without one won’t be permitted. If you talk it through with each other and still can’t decide on one, come and speak with me about it and I’ll pick someone appropriate for the role.”

Once again, we had to nominate one person to take the heat.

The protection point I had got my hands on during the provisional special exam seemed like it would be a big hassle now.

I was well aware that many of my classmates were already looking at or thinking of me.

A protection point was the only feasible way for us to override an expulsion.

By appointing me, the holder of the only protection point, as commander of the class, we'd be able to avoid any expulsions even if we ended up losing the exam.

That said...

Were they really fine with having me be the commander so that everyone can avoid the risk of expulsion?

Or, would they ask an excellent student like Horikita to be the commander in order to maximize our chances of winning? Our classmates would probably be fine with either.

If somebody other than me were to volunteer to take the position, most of them probably wouldn't object to it.

At the same time, if nobody wants to do it themselves, everyone's expectations would probably be put on me.

Horikita spoke up again.

"How will our opponent be decided?"

"After each class selects their commanders, they will be expected to meet up in the multipurpose room after school today. There will probably be a raffle where the commander of one class is given the option to choose who their opponents will be. You should decide ahead of time on who you'll choose if you win the raffle."

From what she said, the raffle winner would get to choose the class they wanted, and the remaining two classes would be matched up automatically.

“Then, we should choose Class D, right? Our chances of winning against them would be much higher!”

“It’s true that, given that they’ve got relatively worse coordination, you would probably be more successful if you chose to go against a class that has resigned itself to a position like Class D. However, going against those of a lower rank is not necessarily the most advantageous choice to make.”

Chabashira was implying that, if that were the case, odds are all three classes would inevitably try to choose Class D. Class D would certainly be the easiest to deal with now that Ryuuken was no longer in charge.

“In this exam, what matters is knowing which class is best suited to be your opponent. It’s incredibly important that you leverage the strengths and weaknesses of each of the other classes.”

Going up against Class A or Class B wouldn’t necessarily mean that it’s hopeless for us.

We would have decent enough chances of winning as long as we choose events that favor us.

That said, the higher ranked the class, the more formidable an opponent they would be. It’s unavoidable.

Despite Chabashira’s advice, not a single one of us was smiling.

Even Horikita was lost in thought over the possibilities, wondering if we could beat Class A or Class B in our current state.

“Seems like my words weren’t very comforting. In that case, let’s try facing reality. If it so happens that you lose and Class D wins... you’ll probably go back to being at the bottom once again.”

Chabashira picked up the chalk again and began to write down the current class point distribution on the blackboard.

Class Points as of March 1st:

Class A – 1001 points

Class B – 640 points

Class C – 377 points

Class D – 318 points

Class C and Class D were neck and neck. We have managed to rise up to Class C over the course of the past year, but at the last moment, we would end up dropping back down to Class D if we lose.

Essentially, for our class, the goal was to hold onto our position through whatever means necessary.

“As for how the exam will affect class points... Each event will increase or decrease your class points by 30 points. As examples, you’ll get 210 class points if you win all seven matches. If you win five and lose two, you’ll get 90. These points will come directly from the opposing class. Furthermore, the class that comes out on top will be granted 100 points from the school as a reward.”

In other words, we could earn a maximum of 310 class points.

Being able to snatch class points away from our opponent by winning events was another big thing to keep in mind. So far we hadn't been given an opportunity to make a dent in the class points of the higher ranking classes even if we wanted to, but now it was possible to close the gap all in one go. Depending on the matchups and the results, we may very well rise up to Class B or drop down to Class D.

“If your opponent doesn't have enough class points, the school will temporarily make up the difference and provide them the missing points. In other words, classes with negative class points will appear to have 0 on the surface, but they'll still be responsible for reimbursing the school for the deficit later on.”

From what it sounded like, this meant that class points could invisibly drop below 0.

Either way, every class had more than 210 points, so that didn't seem like it was something we had to worry about this time at least.

Part 1

After Chabashira left, there was still a bit of time before classes started.

Our classmates crowded around the handout of the event rules that had been left on the podium.

“If you’d excuse me.”

Horikita squeezed her way through the crowd and took pictures of it with her cell phone.

She had probably taken the initiative to do so in order to take her time to read through it once she got back to her own seat.

I simply stayed in my seat and watched as it happened.

“I’d be willing to show you too. Though, you might not be interested.”

“I appreciate it.”

Immediately after, she texted me the two pictures.

Event Selection Exam – Rules for Selecting Events

There are restrictions on events and rules that are overly obscure or complex. Exceedingly niche event genres may not be allowed. Should an event include written exam questions or anything else of that nature, the school will provide the problems in order to maintain fairness. Additionally, attempting to deviate from or modify the fundamental rules of an event is prohibited.

Usable Facilities: – On the day of the special exam, the designated commanders will operate from the multipurpose room. Additionally, school facilities such as the gymnasium, sports grounds, music room, and science lab are generally permitted for use, but there are some exceptions.

Event and Time Restrictions: – For each class, events deemed to be duplicates of pre-existing events will not be accepted. Additionally, it is possible for events that have no stated time limit or that take too long to complete to be dismissed.

Number of Participants: – The number of participants required for each of the ten proposed events must be different, excluding those acting as substitutes.
– The minimum number of participants is one and the maximum number is twenty, including those acting as substitutes.

– A class may not submit more than two events that require more than ten participants from a single class, including those acting as substitutes.

Conditions for Participation:

– Each student may participate in one event and no more than that. However, if every student from a particular class has participated in an event, students from that class will be allowed to participate more than once.

The Role of the Commander:

– Commanders hold the right to be involved in all seven events. How exactly they'll be involved will be determined by the class that proposed the event. These methods of participation must be approved by the school prior to being accepted.

It was roughly divided into five categories.

For any given event, there could be anywhere from one to twenty participants. There aren't very many events that would require twenty people but, depending on how it's handled, it would be more than possible to come up with some. If we manage to come up with two events that collectively use close to forty people, we'd be able to let some students participate two or even three times depending on the circumstances. No matter how much we want to keep the numbers low and only choose a select few to participate, it would immediately become difficult to do so since we have to ensure that the number of participants in each event is different.

"Jeez, the school's gone and made quite the special exam for us, haven't they?"

"Yeah. But, I guess that might be what they're going for, testing our overall growth this past year and all."

While many students would be participating, a class would still never be able to win if they didn't work together. That was the kind of exam the school had created for us.

It's similar to how it was back during the sports festival, except this time physical ability wasn't the only thing that would give an advantage. Depending on how one looked at it, it was entirely possible that it could turn into a battle purely focused on dexterity, academics, or mental capability.

Most likely, the key to this exam was not only understanding our own strengths and weaknesses, but figuring out those of the other classes as well. Furthermore, I have to agree with the amount of time they've allotted to us for event selections. We would have to go through a considerable number of group discussions and choose carefully if we wanted to get the most out of it.

Moreover, there are also students in our class who might neglect to participate. If we can't get everyone to participate in an event at least once, nobody would be able to go a second time, which we'd have to make additional adjustments for.

Having more or less understood the rules, Horikita let show a slight face of discontent.

“Seems you have some complaints about the special exam.”

“Yes, many. The biggest one being the fact that the class with more of their own events chosen on exam day pretty much holds the key to victory. We'll be put at a major disadvantage if the events happen to favor our opponents.”

The only events we could have absolute confidence in are the ones we prepared ourselves.

So, it was only natural that we'd prefer to compete with our own events instead of those of our opponents.

“It'd be much fairer if the school were to just select ten events, present them to each class, and then randomly pick seven of them on the day of the exam.”

Indeed, if one were to evaluate it on the basis of fairness, Horikita's objection would certainly be correct. However...

“If they did it that way, the lower-ranked classes would most likely have even lower chances of winning though. We should probably interpret this way of handling it as the school being merciful and allowing the lower classes to also have a chance of coming out on top if they're lucky enough.”

Generally speaking, the higher a class's rank, the more excellent its students.

“That... That’s certainly another way to look at it, but... this exam still doesn’t sit well with me.”

Speaking of which...

Despite it being such a critical time for the class to come together and wrap our heads around the exam, Hirata simply sat motionless at his desk, his eyes downcast as he quietly waited for time to pass by.

“He was the center of the class until just the other day.”

“Are you saying that it’s my fault?”

“Well, who knows.”

It was Hirata’s own problem, but I didn’t think that anyone, himself included, knew exactly what that problem was.

“Guys, there’s one thing I’d like cleared up about before we start talking.”

While Hirata remained completely motionless, Sudō spoke up instead, set on starting up an internal class discussion.

After a brief glance in my direction, he looked over the entire class.

“Many of us aren’t happy with what happened last weekend. Ain’t that right Kanji?”

“...Well, I dunno if I’m unhappy with it. I really just don’t get what happened is all. Everyone’s been wondering how Ayanokōji ended up with the most praise votes. Like, how’d he even get 42 of ‘em?”

Many eyes were beginning to turn toward me, with those from the Ayanokōji Group being no exception.

“He must’ve gotten tons of praise votes from the other classes, right?”

There hadn’t been any time for explanations or excuses last weekend.

I had already anticipated that somebody would bring this matter up a long time ago.

The only issue was, there was no way for me to easily speak up about it in this situation.

As someone from the lower caste of the class, I wasn’t in any position where I could openly explain what had taken place.

“About that, I’ll explain what happened.”

Horikita took the initiative and spoke up in my place.

“Hold up. We want to hear it from Ayanokōji. We lost a buddy... You know that right?”

“That might not be possible.”

With that, Horikita stood up and began to cover for me.

“Not possible? How so?”

“Because it’s quite likely that Ayanokōji-kun himself doesn’t quite understand what happened.”

“...Ayanokōji doesn’t understand?”

“Correct. To put it simply, it was all part of Sakayanagi-san’s plan. I’ve personally taken the time to try and figure out why she did such a thing. I’ll explain that as well.”

In order to provide a step-by-step explanation, Horikita began to answer in a way that was easy to understand.

“First off, she targeted Yamauchi-kun, telling him to feel reassured since she’d provide him with praise votes. In fact, there’s no doubt about this since Yamauchi ultimately ended up admitting to it himself. But, behind the scenes, she had probably chosen to give those praise votes to a different student.”

“That... I guess that’s true. But, why did she choose to give them to Ayanokōji?”

“Good question. Why do you think that is, Sudō-kun?”

“Uhm... Maybe it’s somethin’ like Ayanokōji’s actually super incredible? So she decided he was worthy of praise votes... or somethin’ like that?”

“Have you seen anything unusually exceptional about him? To me, he just seems like a student who’s quick on his feet.”

“That... Well, I guess that’s true.”

“His grades on written exams haven’t been that great, and aside from that one time he ran fast, he hasn’t been very noteworthy in sports either. Instead, since his other qualities aren’t on the same level as his running speed, it’s possible that he’s not even athletically capable in the first place. What’s more, he most certainly doesn’t come across as charismatic either.”

From the perspective of those in our surroundings, her words almost described me to a fault. There simply wasn't any room for disagreement.

"That is to say, your idea is improbable."

Horikita spoke without even the slightest hesitation.

"So you're saying he was chosen by mere coincidence? Man, I just don't see it."

"Try using your head a little. For argument's sake, let's suppose Ayanokōji-kun is actually an incredibly talented person. Would an enemy like Sakayanagi really be willing to deliberately give a protection point to somebody like that? It'd be undeniably stupid for them to cast praise votes on a seemingly formidable opponent. If there had to be an exception, it'd be to cast them for someone predestined to end up with the most votes in their class from the very beginning like Ichinose-san, wouldn't it?"

In reality, Ichinose had ended up with a total of 98 praise votes. This came from the idea that it'd be better to stack all the praise votes on one single person, instead of casting them for somebody at random.

"I'd totally never wanna give a protection point to someone like that."

"True! That's true."

Kei and Sakura both spoke out in agreement with Horikita's deduction, followed by many of the other boys in the class.

"I don't know the reason why Sakayanagi-san targeted Yamauchi-kun, but everything that happened makes sense if we assume that she wanted to have Yamauchi-kun expelled from the school. It probably went down exactly as she

planned for it to, setting it all up so that Yamauchi-kun and Ayanokōji-kun would butt heads. In which case, she could seal Yamauchi-kun's fate by focusing a large number of praise votes on Ayanokōji-kun instead."

"So you're saying... Haruki's expulsion was the entire purpose of Sakayanagi's strategy?"

"Exactly. And it follows that Ayanokōji-kun being chosen... no, being used was just a mere coincidence. He doesn't stand out, nor does he pose a threat to her class. From what I can gather, that must have been how it all played out."

Generally speaking, Horikita's explanation was very advantageous to me. I couldn't think of a single way it could be used to implicate me any further.

"It's pretty much the only reason I can think of for why she targeted Yamauchi-kun and protected Ayanokōji-kun."

After hearing everything she's said, even Sudō and Ike would have no choice but to agree with her.

And yet, it still seemed like Sudō just couldn't come to terms with it.

"Are you upset that I stood up for him?"

Horikita asked, having seen Sudō's conflicted expression.

Sudō simply looked away from her without giving her a response.

"I stood up for Ayanokōji-kun because I'm well aware that the one most responsible for Yamauchi-kun's expulsion is me, not him."

The one who had exposed Yamauchi's schemes to the rest of the class and had driven him into a corner was none other than Horikita herself.

“If you’re looking for someone to blame, it would be ridiculous for you to pin it on anyone other than me.”

“That’s...”

It would be impossible for Sudō to blame Horikita for what had happened.

Deep down, he understood the reality of the situation: that unnecessary students would inevitably be discarded and cast away.

It’s just, no matter how profitable it was to think this way, it wasn’t just something everyone could take at face value.

At the end of the day, the frustration was really because I had ended up with a protection point.

Because I was the only person who could safely watch over the exam from the sidelines.

“This special exam... How about I volunteer to be the commander?”

Having sensed an opportunity, I cut in.

While I still hadn’t heard anything from Sakayanagi, I was nearly 100% certain she’d be the commander for Class A.

In which case, we probably wouldn’t be able to faceoff against each other unless I held the position as well.

“I know that the class is wary of me because of what happened during The Class Vote Exam, so I want to clear up those suspicions by becoming the scapegoat this time around.”

“Ayanokōji...”

Sudō looked at me, a bit surprised.

“Sweet! This way, nobody’ll have to be expelled and Ayanokōji’ll be able to clear his name as well!”

Thrilled at the idea that we’d get through the exam without any expulsions, Ike spoke up in support of my nomination.

“No, hold on a sec. I’m glad Ayanokōji-kun’s okay with taking on the position, but I’m not exactly okay with having him be the commander.”

The unexpected student who cut in this time was none other than Shinohara.

“Sure, by having Ayanokōji-kun do it, we won’t have to say goodbye to anyone else if we lose because of his protection point. But, doesn’t that kinda feel like we’d be giving up on winning from the get-go? It’d be like we’re setting ourselves up just to get stomped on! Horikita-san said it herself, Ayanokōji-kun is just average.”

In other words, she simply couldn’t see our class coming out on top with me leading the way.

“If it turns out that we’re matched up with Class A or Class B, wouldn’t he have to face off against Sakayanagi-san or Ichinose-san? The commander seems like it’s real important, and I don’t think we’ll stand a chance if it’s Ayanokōji-kun. You guys know we’ll probably drop back down to Class D if we lose, right?”

Some of the students would undoubtedly agree with Shinohara’s opinion.

“Like, wouldn’t it at least be better to see if anyone else’s interested?”

Despite her words, the position came with a heavy risk attached to it. Nobody here would be foolish enough to readily raise their hand.

In the past, we might've been able to rely on Hirata, but this time, it didn't seem like that was going to happen.

Even now, he sat alone with his head down, not even attempting to act like he was taking part in the discussion.

Under these circumstances, if there was anybody else fearless enough to nominate himself for the role...

Everyone gradually turned and looked toward Horikita.

However, considering the situation, I didn't think-

"I apologize, but I don't want to take on the risk either. If Ayanokōji-kun's volunteering himself, then I'd like to enjoy the same benefits as the rest of the class. Shinohara-san's right. There's no honest guarantee we can beat Class A or Class B if we go up against one of them at our current level."

"But... You were totally just covering for Ayanokōji-kun, like, just a few seconds ago. And now you wanna have him be commander?"

Kei, having been listening from the sidelines for a while now, quickly called Horikita out on her inconsistency.

"I thought he might choose to volunteer for the position on his own if I spared him the effort of proving he had nothing to do with Yamauchi-kun's expulsion. That's all."

With this, Horikita had cleverly blocked off any of my potential escape routes.

It seemed like she had been aiming to pass the responsibilities of the commander off to me, just like I had expected of her.

In her eyes, I was much more capable than most other students.

She had probably already decided that, instead of entrusting the position to some half-baked student, it would be safer to leave it to me. Because even in the worst case, I still had a protection point, so it wouldn't matter at all.

"I'd like to ask, is there anyone else who's willing to be the commander?"

At this point, the only people who could object would be those willing to put themselves on the line as well.

Regardless, there didn't appear to be anyone else willing to take on the risk.

"Even if Ayanokōji-kun is the commander on paper, we can just make careful preparations for everything ahead of time. As long as he acts as instructed on the day of the exam, it shouldn't make too much of a difference who the commander is."

Voices of agreement came from various students who weren't willing to think about it too deeply.

"At any rate, class is starting soon. The school hasn't set aside any additional time for us to iron out the details, so it seems to me like we should arrange a time for everyone to meet up together."

From what it seemed, Horikita would be the one to look after the class now that Hirata wasn't taking the initiative to do so.

3

OPPONENTS

On that same day, during lunch break, almost every student in Class C had agreed to meet up in the classroom.

The students who didn't bring their own lunches to school were expected to go out and purchase one, then reassemble in the classroom immediately after.

As I was one of those who hadn't brought lunch, I left the classroom.

Then, I made my way to an isolated location and contacted two specific people with my phone.

I was able to reach the first immediately since I had already sent them a message beforehand.

As for the other person...

After finishing up, I quickly bought my lunch and made my way back to the class.

By the time I had gotten back, there were only two people who hadn't returned to the classroom.

The first was Kōenji Rokusuke, a student who couldn't be tied down by anyone.

The other person was Hirata Yōsuke.

Other than those two, there were 37 students gathered in the classroom.

"It seems like Hirata-kun isn't joining after all."

“Looks like it.”

Although some people were voicing their concerns, we were running out of time with every passing moment.

It would be better for everyone if we held as many event selection discussions as possible. Every single one counted.

““Turn over a new leaf”, my ass! In the end, that guy doesn’t have any plans on taking this seriously at all, does he!?”

I could understand why Sudō was on the verge of an outburst.

There were probably at least some of us who thought Kōenji might take things more seriously, even if just on the surface.

However, reality isn’t so kind.

Or rather, humans aren’t ones to change that easily.

Skating by with colorful, half-hearted words, Kōenji would probably continue to give us the slip.

But I don’t think that will work forever.

Sooner or later, another exam like The Class Vote would happen again.

And when that time comes, Kōenji would be the one who had to pay the price.

“Screw that piece of shit, let’s just start.”

“Don’t let him get under your skin. Anyways, I made copies of the handout Chabashira-sensei left for us so everyone could have one. I’ll distribute them now.

Carefully read through it as you eat. We'll have a more thorough discussion on the specifics after school."

Now that Hirata was out of the picture, Horikita had no choice but to step up and lead the way.

"If there's anything you come across that you don't understand, please feel free to come ask me about it while we're eating."

From the looks of it, Horikita had already read through the handout and fully understood everything.

Part 1

The same day, after all the classes had ended...

Chabashira instructed the class to send the commander, whoever that may be, out into the hallway as soon as possible and left the classroom.

Hirata was the first person to stand up from their seat.

“Erm... The events... We’ll be discuss-”

One of the girls, Nishimura, hurriedly tried to call out to him.

However, her words didn’t seem to get through, as he just quietly left the classroom.

“Hirata-kun...”

Nishimura and many other students were taken back by the intense dejected atmosphere surrounding Hirata.

The only exception to this was Kōenji, who was casually looking at his phone as if he hadn’t noticed anything at all.

“I’m... going to the bathroom for a bit. I’ll be right back!”

The one to say this was none other than Mei-Yu Wang, a student that everyone called Mii-chan.

Although she said she was going to the bathroom, she had probably gone to chase after Hirata instead.

“Since he’s not being useful, I guess I’ll have to do it after all.”

Horikita took the initiative and began preparing to go up the teacher's podium.

“Sorry, but I’ll leave this to you. I have my duties as the commander to deal with.”

“Yeah. Head to the multipurpose room to decide which class we’re going up against. If you’re given the choice, choose Class D.”

“I know. Just don’t expect too much out of me.”

I got up from my seat and left the classroom.

As the one who had taken on the responsibilities of the commander, I walked out into the hallway.

“So it’s you this time, Ayanokōji. Who on earth is the commander?”

With an exasperated sigh, Chabashira looked in the direction Hirata and Mii-chan had gone off to.

“It’s me. I’m the commander.”

“Oh...?”

Together, the two of us headed off to the special building.

“Isn’t the special building a bit far when we’re just selecting our opponents?”

“We’ll also be going over the details on how you’ll be managing things on the day of the exam.”

There was barely anybody around as we arrived at the special building, so the sound of our footsteps was notably louder than usual.

“You went through so much to get your hands on a protection point, only to be forced to become the commander. How unlucky.”

“I wasn’t forced. I volunteered for the position myself.”

Chahashira stopped walking for a moment.

“...You did?”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“I thought you hated attracting unnecessary attention?”

Chabashira questioned.

“The only difference was whether or not they forced me into it.”

“I see. You’re saying that in either case, you weren’t in much of a position where you could turn it down.”

At the end of the day, the students who had won a protection point were much more likely to become the commander.

If they refused, they would be only one safe from expulsion.

In which case, would they choose to be pushed off a cliff? Or would they choose to jump off on their own terms instead?

“Whatever happened aside, by becoming the commander, you’ve taken on a huge responsibility. If you cut any corners, Class C will be the one to pay the price.”

Since there was nobody around to hear her, Chabashira spoke boldly.

“Are you threatening me?”

As I turned to face her, she let show a slight grin.

“You’re free to think whatever you want. However, I’ll definitely be looking forward to it, Ayanokōji. Because now, after everything that’s happened, I’ll finally be able to see what you’re really made of.”

Her heart set on reaching Class A, Chabashira seemed like she had great expectations of me moving forward.

“There’s no guarantee I’ll win.”

“Is that so? Sorry, but I, for one, can’t possibly imagine that you’d lose.”

After that, the two of us didn’t say very much else as we made our way to the multipurpose room.

Part 2

We arrived at the multipurpose room within the special building, the room that seemed to be the central hub for the special exam.

“It seems like the other three have already arrived.”

The door was already open. Inside, I could see the homeroom teachers from the other classes, each accompanied by a single student. From Class A, it was Sakayanagi. From Class B, it was Ichinose, and from Class D, it was Kaneda.

Unsurprisingly, every single one of us had a protection point.

There were also two computers set up directly opposite of one another, each connected to a single, large monitor.

“Now that all the commanders have gathered, let’s get started with deciding the class match-ups. I’ll have each of you draw a slip from this lottery. The student who draws a slip with a red circle on it will be allowed to choose their opponent.”

Mashima-sensei presented us with a lottery box and prompted Sakayangi to draw from it. However, she refused.

“As they say, good things come to those that wait. I don’t mind going last, so by all means, Ichinose-san.”

“Well, I don’t mind if I do!”

Ichinose drew first, followed by Class C and D. Since the slips weren’t folded, we knew the results of the draw almost immediately. In the end, Class D’s Kaneda drew the winning slip with the red circle on it.

That is to say, Class D had won the right to choose their opponent.

“It seems there’s no need for me to check the last slip, right Mashima-sensei?”

Mashima-sensei drew the final slip from the lottery box and, needless to say, there was no red circle on it.

“It seems good things didn’t come this time, Sakayanagi.”

“I wonder about that. I don’t necessarily have to draw the winning slip to come out on top in the end.”

“It sounds to me like Class A thinks they can rest easy no matter who they end up facing.”

“Oh, that’s not the case. If at all possible, I’d like to avoid confrontation with your class, Ichinose-san.”

Sakayanagi’s response made it hard to tell if she was just being polite or if she had given her honest opinion.

“Could you tell us which class you’ll be choosing?”

At Mashima-sensei’s request, Kaneda gave a small nod.

At some point since this morning, even Class D had probably held a discussion to figure out which of the other classes to go against to secure the highest chance of winning.

“I won’t hesitate then. Class D would like to compete against… Class B.”

Kaneda declared war against an entirely unexpected opponent.

“And you’re sure you want to choose Class B?”

“Yes.”

Having confirmed Kaneda’s decision, Mashima-sensei finalized the class matchups.

With the competition between Class D and Class B set in stone, Class C would naturally compete against Class A.

“I was convinced you would choose Class C, but Class B? Why is that?”

Sakayanagi asked a question, interested in finding out Kaneda’s reasoning.

“In order to turn things around from how they are now, we have to take away as many points as possible from the upper classes. Having said that, we also want to avoid fighting against Class A for the time being.”

Since Class A was an understandably difficult opponent, they had opted to target Class B instead.

“Is that so? As far as I’m concerned, you’ve saved us from the trouble of matching up against a formidable opponent like Class B. I wish Class D the best of luck.”

Sakayanagi offered her gratitude to Kaneda with a slight bow. Though, a little bit of trickery behind the scenes had led us to this current situation. While it goes without saying that Kaneda winning draw had been nothing more than a coincidence, this outcome had already been arranged no matter who drew the winning slip.

I had contacted Ichinose and Ishizaki before school had even ended for the day, telling them that I wanted Class C to compete against Class A.

Apparently, Ichinose had been genuinely interested in competing against Class A and was even planning on doing so, but ultimately, she conceded because she owed me a favor. As for Ishizaki and Class D, they had apparently been planning on challenging Class B anyway, so there hadn't been any complications in the first place.

All of this just to secure my match with Sakayanagi and Class A.

The only problem would've been if I had won the draw.

Since Horikita had told me to choose Class D if given the choice, I would've needed to come up with a convincing excuse.

However, my probability of winning was just one in four, so I wasn't all too concerned. Put simply, the whole thing had been a fixed job from the start. I was also pretty sure Sakayanagi was aware that I had made some arrangements beforehand.

In this way, the class matchups had been decided ahead of time.

“With that done, I'll now explain the system you'll be using on exam day. You'll be in this room, using a computer similar to the two we have set up

right over here. This is where you'll be assigning your classmates to the events in real-time."

Chabashira went to the left computer and broadcasted the screen onto the large display.

As Chabashira operated the computer, Mashima-sensei continued his explanation.

"As an example, this is a catalog of all the Class A students. Using the mouse, you'll drag a student's portrait and drop it into the box of the event you'll have them participate in. If you make a mistake or reconsider your choices halfway through, just drag and drop the photo out of the box and reselect from there. Alternatively, you can also do all of this with the touchscreen."

"This kinda feels like a video game, right?"

"It totally does, doesn't it!"

Ichinose and Hoshinomiya-sensei engaged in a fun little side conversation with each other.

"There will be a time limit imposed on selecting the participants for each event, which is represented by the number you currently see counting down

on-screen. The more students there are in a given event, the more time you'll have to select them. You can expect to be given approximately thirty seconds per person."

That is, given a ten-person event, we would have roughly 300 seconds to make a decision.

"If you don't make a selection within the provided time limit, any remaining spaces will be filled with somebody chosen at random, so do keep that in mind. Conversely, if you end up selecting too many students, the excess participants will be forced out at random as well."

In other words, it would be strictly forbidden to go over the time limit.

"Once an event begins, the match will be broadcast live on this large monitor."

Stock footage of a shogi match began to play on the monitor, much like what one would see on TV.

"The rules for how a commander can participate in the current event will be listed on your screen after the event has started."

The footage on the monitor changed over to show the screen of the left computer once again, where the words 『At one point during the match, the commander can pause the game and re-do a move』 were displayed.

This was probably an example of the rules that Mashima-sensei had just referred to.

“As the commander, you can choose to intervene at any time by clicking on the rule you want to act upon. Be sure to keep this in mind.”

The monitor changed back to the shogi video once again.

“You won’t be allowed to provide your classmates with instructions over the phone. Instead, we will be adopting a text-to-speech system that will read out the messages you send them. After you type out your message and send it, it will be played through your classmate’s headset.”

This meant that a machine would be automatically reading out our messages after we sent them. This was probably done in order to prevent us from conveying more information than we were allowed to. Using the shogi match as an example, the commanders are only allowed to intervene a single time to change one move on the board, but if they’re careful with how they phrase their instructions, they might be able to convey two or three move’s worth of instructions instead.

“Should a commander step out of line and interfere with an event in a way the rules don’t allow, their class may be faced with disqualification and lose the event.”

I had expected this. It’d be safe to assume that a third party would be carefully checking every message we sent our classmates.

“For each event, only one person in each class will be allowed to wear one of the headsets. Even in a team event, only one person will be allowed to receive instructions. As the commander, you’ll have to choose who this person will be.”

From the looks of it, I had more on my plate than I expected.

While there were plenty of things we could decide on beforehand, we would always have to be ready for unexpected circumstances.

“You’ll be allowed to send out your instructions whenever you want, so long as it abides by the rules.”

We could freely change our screen layouts whenever we wanted, including minimizing or maximizing certain aspects of the display to show only the information we wanted to see.

Between observing the students in the current event to making preparations for the next one, there would be plenty of stuff to do to keep us occupied.

“This wraps up my explanation of the commander’s duties and procedures. Are there any questions?”

Mashima-sensei did a quick glance throughout the room, but it didn’t seem like anyone had something they wanted to bring up.

“Alright then, that’ll be all for today. If any of you want to go over the system or check on something, you’ll be allowed to visit the multipurpose classroom under teacher supervision until one week before the exam. You’re all dismissed.”

With that, the explanation was finished and we all left.

Part 3

After heading back to my dorm, I messaged Horikita which class we would be going up against and began to think about how I would fulfill my duties as the commander. In retrospect, this was the first time I would be facing a special exam head-on.

In all honesty, if this was a one-on-one battle, I didn't think I would lose.

However, this was a battle where I had to command the class as a whole.

I would only be able to fight confined within the scope of my classmate's abilities.

Given an army of children, even an unparalleled strategist like Sun Tzu wouldn't stand a chance against an army of fully-grown adults.

Although the commander's unique ability to intervene in events would be the key to victory, I was still missing something fundamental that I needed in order to compete.

That is, I needed to grasp the current potential of Class C.

Who does everyone like and dislike? What are their strengths? Their weaknesses?

Without understanding all the different pieces of the puzzle, the path to victory wouldn't open.

Plus, when it comes to networking and leadership skills, I clearly fall short when compared to the rest of the class. Currently, I don't even know what people like Shinohara or Onodera like to eat.

That being the case, what should I do first?

The answer was obvious. I needed to reach out to someone who knew the class as if it were the back of their hand.

It was simple, but I didn't really have any other options.

There were only three people who could fit this criterion: Kei, Hirata, and Kushida.

Ideally, I wanted to consult all three of them.

However, given the current situation, the only one who'd definitely be willing to help me would be Kei.

Hirata was currently far beyond recovery, and Kushida had been deeply wounded during The Class Vote. While she wasn't showing it on the surface, she was probably quite furious with Horikita. It's unknown just

how much skepticism she has toward me, but it's safe to assume she's become warier of me than before.

At around six in the evening, just as the sun was beginning to set, my doorbell rang.

Without hesitation, I unlocked the door and invited the visitor into my room.

“...Heyo.”

The visitor was Karuizawa Kei, who was still in her school uniform.

“Did you only just get back from school?”

“That's cus, unlike you, I have a ton of friends. Besides, I'm the star today.”

Her choice of words was a bit peculiar. She turned to look at me.

“The star? Why?”

Seeing as I didn't understand what she was getting at, Kei looked away from me with a slightly irritated look on her face.

“...Whatever, it’s nothing. Anyways, isn’t it weird for you to call for me at a time like this? And what’s with you saying I don’t need to be careful anymore? Didn’t you say it’d be a problem if we’re seen by somebody?”

She uneasily glanced around my room.

“It’s fine. After everything that’s happened, I don’t think that’s necessary anymore.”

“Cause of, uh, Hashimoto-kun from Class A, right? And that upperclassmen who saw us together?”

“Something like that.”

“Our relationship will slowly become public knowledge, you know that right...? And that’s okay with you?”

“I have no problems with it at all.”

My immediate response seemed to give Kei some peace of mind, as she let out a sigh of relief.

“Well, then, it’s fine I guess.”

It’s true that some actions would be easier to carry out if nobody knew about my connection with Kei.

But the situation was gradually beginning to change.

Moreover, it would be easier for Kei to move openly instead of acting as a spy from now on.

“But, like... you and I are still a boy and a girl from the same class, you know? If word gets out that I was seen coming here, won’t weird rumors about how the two of us were alone together start to spread?”

Had she always been the type to care about something like that?

“I’m the commander for this exam, and you’re a central figure in Class C. The two of us meeting privately shouldn’t be too unnatural.”

Just to make sure she felt comfortable, I added on an extra layer of reasoning to my explanation.

“Umm, well, I guess that’s true...”

Something about this still appeared to be bothering her.

“Speaking of which, why’d you agree to become the commander? You aren’t the type of guy who’d feel obligated to do so just cus you got a protection point.”

As expected, she understands the type of person I am, at least to a certain extent.

“Personal feelings aside, I needed to show my sincerity to the class. Yamauchi had only just been expelled, so everyone’s still pretty paranoid. Nominating myself for the role was the best option available.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“If it were me, I wouldn’t have become the commander, like, no matter what.”

She was only able to take a stance like that because of the image she had established for herself. Even if she were to stubbornly insist that the protection point was hers to use as she pleased, nobody would be able to hold it against her. It was genuinely impressive.

“Let’s change the topic. Tell me about the internal state of the class.”

“Internal state, huh? Like, I don’t even know where to start. For your information, it’s not like I know everything myself, okay? Especially when it comes to the boys. I dunno anything about them.”

“That’s fine. If possible, I hope to consult with both Hirata and Kushida at some point later on.”

This hope was nothing more than just that. A hope.

For the time being, there was no telling whether or not they’d speak with me.

“Sure, you’ll find out pretty much everything about the class if you speak with the two of them, but like...”

Kei paused for a moment and wearily folded her arms in front of her.

“Kushida-san aside, don’t you think it seems kinda impossible to reach out to Yōsuke-kun? He seems like he’s given up entirely.”

“Are you worried about him?”

“Well, yeah. Nobody in Class C actually likes seeing Yōsuke-kun like that.”

Class C without Hirata, a situation where we were at a complete disadvantage. Since nobody was willing to step up and moderate, the class was lacking an overall sense of stability.

“Either way, I’ll hear you out first.”

“It’ll be hard for me to do all the talking, so like, let’s do this with you asking me questions, kay?”

If that’s what she wanted, I’d comply. I would ask about each girl one at a time.

She went down the class roster, and I proceeded to memorize the relevant information about every girl in Class C.

Part 4

“...and that should be about everything.”

In just under ten minutes, I got pretty much all of the necessary information I needed from Kei.

“Hey. Are you sure you don’t need to take any notes or something? Even if you beg, I’m not gonna explain everything all over again, okay?”

“It’s fine.”

“You’re sayin’ you’ve got it all memorized?”

“More or less.”

“Oh woow. How totally impressive.”

Kei praised me, but the way she did so made it seem like she didn’t really mean it.

“Anyway, our opponent is Class A this time, right? Isn’t it gonna be super hard for you?”

“I’m not the one who’ll be competing. That’ll be up to you and the rest of the class. Just because I can intervene as the commander doesn’t mean I’ll

always be able to turn around a difficult situation. In fact, I should be the one asking if you'll be okay?"

"M-me? I..."

She tried to say something, but the words seemed to get stuck in her throat.

"...Could you make sure I don't have to participate?"

"I'm not the only one who gets to decide on that. Depending on what Class A does, you might even need to participate twice."

"No no no, there's totally no way. I'm not good at studying and I'm terrible at sports!"

She shook her head frantically, emphasizing that she didn't want to be forced to participate.

"If it's you, Kiyotaka, I'm sure you can beat Sakayanagi-san!"

With this, she looked at me with a thumbs-up. She probably just wanted to avoid participating and prevent taking on any responsibility for the outcome.

However, not even Kei could grasp the true extent of my abilities.

“Plus, nobody’s actually expecting that you’ll beat Class A. Doesn’t that make everything that much easier?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Everything’s easy when you don’t have very much expected of you.

“Sooo... is this everything you wanted to talk to me about? Didn’t you say we had to meet up in person?”

Kei pouted, the look in her eyes saying ‘If there’s nothing else, we could’ve just spoken over the phone’.

“Some things are easier to understand when communicated in person.”

Kei’s expression stiffened even further. This didn’t seem to be the answer she was expecting.

“Humph... Sounds like we’re done then. Well... I’ll be leaving, kay?”

With everything important having been discussed, Kei excused herself.

At this point, she probably didn’t think anything else would happen even if she continued dropping hints.

“I’ll contact you again if something important comes up.”

“...Sure, whatever.”

It seemed like she had been expecting something this whole time, but now it looked like she had given up.

I guess she was going to stay stubborn until the very end, wholly unwilling to broach the topic herself.

It would've made it a whole lot easier for me too if she had just come out with it...

“Hold on a moment. I still have something to say.”

I stood up and began to walk over to my drawer.

Before she came over, I had stashed a special something away so she wouldn't notice it when she entered the room.

“What is it... If you had something to say, you should've said so earlier!”

“It's just, today is your birthday, isn't it?”

“Eh? Seriously? You knew...?”

I took the special something I had prepared for her out of my drawer. I had ordered it from one of the stores on campus and had them ship it wrapped up in wrapping paper for the special occasion.

“I was just teasing you a bit.”

“W-well, stop doing weird stuff like that. If you have a present, you shoulda given it to me earlier, okay? I’ve gotten a ton of good stuff from my friends already too, so this’d better be worth my time.”

As she spoke, she extended her hand out to receive the gift, unwilling to look me in the eye as she did.

Seeing Kei act like this, I promptly stopped handing her the present.

“Were you looking forward to this?”

“N... n-not really?”

“If that’s the case, I guess I could always take it back.”

“Wha... What!?!? You can’t just go and change your mind once you’ve decided to give something to someone!”

Her response was pretty much impossible to understand.

“This is also your return gift for White Day, though.”

“How typical... So you’re the kinda guy who does everything at once cuz it’s too much work to do otherwise, huh?”

Kei let out an exasperated sigh and grabbed the present out of my hand.

A suspicious look appeared on her face as soon as she held it in her hands. After all, it was a tiny, square box, and moreover, it didn’t weigh very much at all.

“Did you even put anything in it?”

“I wouldn’t have the courage to gift you an empty box.”

I could already imagine how angry she would get if I did something like that.

“Then I suppose you wouldn’t mind if I make sure of that, hmm?”

Kei spoke as if she was a police officer interrogating a suspect, and proceeded to check the contents of the box. She carefully unwrapped the wrapping paper and took off the lid to the box that had been hiding underneath.

Nestled within the box was a single piece of metal that sparkled with a bright, golden shine.

“Wh... What is this!?”

While she seemed immensely surprised, it was clear that pretty much anyone would know exactly what it was.

“It’s a necklace.”

“W-well obviously! This gift is like, waaay too much!”

“Too much?”

“I-I mean, necklaces aren’t the kinda things friends give to each other!”

Or so she says, but...

I tilted my head, not quite sure what Kei was getting at.

However, it didn’t seem like she was looking to hear a response from me. Instead, it seemed like she was itching to say something else.

“Plus, you know what else? This doesn’t even look good on me! Like, it’s heart-shaped!”

At this point, she was probably referring to how the necklace's pendant was shaped like a heart.

Apparently, the birthday present I had chosen wasn't very good.

"It's shaped like a heart!"

She seemed particularly unhappy with that shape, as she bothered to emphasize it a second time.

Her face was turning bright red as she voiced her dissatisfaction. Anybody would feel a little hurt after hearing such harsh objections, even me.

After all, at the end of the day, a present is given in order to spread happiness.

"Wasn't this expensive?"

"Well it wasn't cheap. It was like twenty-thousand yen."



“Twenty thou... Why did you go out of your way to get such an expensive necklace!?”

“Why?”

Kei looked at me, her face turning even redder than before.

Given the situation, it seemed like it would be best to answer her honestly.

“To tell you the truth, I’ve never given something like a birthday present to a girl before. So, I decided to do some research on the internet as a starting point. I came across a major online shopping website, Rakkan Ichiba, where they recommended that necklace as the number one birthday present for girls. It even mentioned that it would be especially popular with high school girls.”

I could still remember how the website declared it to be the absolute best gift, regardless of whether you’re in a relationship or not.

I decided that it was a reasonable price to pay since I was giving her a single gift for both her birthday and White Day.

“Good lord...”

For some reason, Kei looked at me and cringed.

I found myself thinking that I might have really messed something up this time.

“You’re so smart and yet, kind-of an idiot when it comes to stuff like this. It’s like you were born yesterday or something. First of all, even if it said this would be a hit with high school girls, this is the sorta thing girls want to pick out for themselves. That way, they can choose something they like or whatever suits their tastes. Well, at least you didn’t get me a ring or something where you’d have had to know the size of my finger... Put simply, this gift only gets like, 10 out of 100 points, kay?”

I had gone and prepared such an expensive present, but the result seemed to be disastrous.

She had just explained what high school girls were like, but there was still a lot I needed to reflect upon.

I had chosen the present with the best intentions, but it was hard to say if I had really considered how she would feel about it.

“What if I had given you a simple box of desserts?”

“That’d bump you up to a 15 out of 100.”

To think a simple box of sweets would've been better than a twenty thousand yen necklace...

“I don't think you can return it now that it's been opened, but if you don't want it you can just leave it here. If you'd like, I can get you a cake box or something in a few days instead.”

I offered her an alternative, deeply regretting my lack of preparation and research.

After all, a 15-point present would probably make Kei happier than a 10-point one.

At least, that's what I thought...

“...”

Kei stared at the necklace for a moment before turning to look at me.

And then, despite what I had just said, she put the necklace around her neck.

She then asked to use my mirror for a second and proceeded to see how it looked on herself.

“Hmm... As I thought, the heart is a bit childish... But since I have such a hot body, anything ends up looking good on me~”

While I couldn't help but wonder what in the world this first-year high school student was talking about, Kei was completely serious.

Kei took a moment to check how the necklace looked on her from every angle before finally nodding in satisfaction.

I had thought she would give it back to me after trying it on, but instead, she carefully set the necklace back in its box and put the box in her bag.

“Well, this was your first time giving a gift to a girl, right? I'll be nice and accept it, just this once.”

“...Well, that sounds fine to me.”

It wasn't like I'd have been able to give it to anybody else if she refused to take it, anyway.

4

WHAT THE CLASS LACKS

The day after the class matchups were decided...

Class C had arranged to hold another class-wide discussion once school was out for the day, so we were free to do what we wanted during the lunch break.

As a result, the Ayanokōji Group gathered to eat lunch together, just like usual.

We all met up at the back of the classroom once lunch started and headed off to the cafeteria.

“How did yesterday’s discussion go?”

Wasting no time, I asked my friends about what the class had discussed the day before.

It had taken about an hour for the commanders to determine the class matchups and go over everything, so by the time I had gotten back to the classroom, everybody had already gone back home for the day.

“You didn’t hear about it from Horikita-san? ...I guess that might make sense.”

Airi responded with a vague answer, but after faltering for a moment, she spoke up again.

“There was an event manual, right? Ultimately, everyone was having a hard time understanding the rules...”

“There wasn’t even a discussion in the first place. It was a complete waste of time.”

Keisei let out an exasperated sigh.

Apparently, our discussion during yesterday’s lunch break hadn’t been enough for everyone to get a grasp of the rules. From the looks of it, the discussion after school yesterday ended once everybody had gotten on the same page. If that’s what had happened, it would’ve been fairly typical of Class C.

“Besides, the problem isn’t just our class.”

“What’s that mean, Yukimuu?”

“There are only so many places on campus where a bunch of students can meet up, right?”

“Well, it’s definitely impossible for forty people to meet up at karaoke or some place at the mall. What of it?”

“I was the first person to leave the classroom after the discussion finished yesterday... When I walked into the hallway, there were some Class A students lingering just outside the door.”

Haruka and Airi exchanged confused glances with each other.

At first, Akito didn’t seem to understand what Keisei was getting at either, but after a moment, he realized it.

“...You’re saying they were spying on us?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. During this exam, important information will be spoken verbally, right? Even if they were only listening in on our discussion, it’s more than likely that they picked up on something.”

Information like which types of events might get chosen, or who was good at what.

Without a doubt, it would be beneficial to obtain information like that, even if only a little.

In other words, the battle had already begun.

“Looking at it from that point of view, Class C has already fallen behind.”

“Scary! Sakayanagi-san’s already made her move.”

Trembling in fear, Haruka began to rub the back of her arms.

“Then, shouldn’t we start to gather information about Class A? Kinda like that one guy said, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

Quickly changing her tone, Haruka then proposed we fight back against Class A.

However, there was no way Keisei would agree so easily.

“If it were that simple, it wouldn’t be a problem in the first place.”

“Ehh?”

“I’m probably not the only one who thinks this either. Even Horikita should understand that there’s no point in doing that. Do you really think Class A is going to gather up in a classroom and hold a forty-person discussion?”

Class C struggled with its lack of unity and cooperation, and these attributes were the first thing we needed to focus on.

This was completely different from Class A, where top students like Sakayanagi decided on everything.

Who the commander is. Who comes up with the events. Who's in charge of collecting information.

They had already decided on everything the moment the exam began.

Besides, even if they were to hold a classwide discussion, they would probably have two or three people stand guard to prevent us from eavesdropping.

“But, like, wouldn't it be fine to at least try? We might even be able to catch them off guard at some point. Who knows, maybe they'll meet up in their classroom to talk about the exam.”

“If that happens, I'd be afraid instead. I'd suspect any information we'd manage to get our hands on.”

If the information we overheard ended up being fake, we would've just been wasting our time. Keisei's concerns were spot on. Information should be hidden when possible; anything that isn't should be heavily suspected.

“However, an information war is absolutely inevitable. The crucial part is figuring out what kind of method to use...”

“Do... we even stand a chance?”

Airi spoke, surrendering to her feelings of anxiety.

“At this point, it’d probably be better to think of it as though they’re just a step or two ahead of us.”

Since Class C still hadn’t even decided on anything yet, we had no reason to think we were in the lead in the first place.

“Still, who’d have thought we’d have to go against Class A.”

“Sorry. It’s my fault for losing the lottery.”

In reality, I would’ve chosen Class A even if I had won, but I’d at least act apologetic about it like this.

“Ah, no, I wasn’t implying that! That’s totally my bad! I wasn’t blaming you at all, Kiyopon!”

Haruka seemed to take my apology more seriously than I had expected, as she hurriedly spoke up to correct herself.

“Expecting him to win a lotto with only a one in four chance of winning is kinda harsh, Haruka.”

As Akito spoke, Haruka shrunk back even further.

“T-that’s why I said that’s not what I meant...”

At this point she brought something else up, probably wanting to change the topic.

“I think it’d be nice if Class A’d go a little easy on us. They’ve got it easy going up against Class C. Dontcha think so too, Miyatchi?”

“Go easy...? Does Sakayanagi really seem like that type of person to you?”

“...Not at all. She completely crushed Yamauchi-kun, and she could prolly flatten the rest of us too.”

Disheartened, Haruka looked up and began to stare at the ceiling.

“Anyways, it just keeps going wrong for you, doesn’t it Kiyotaka? What with being commander under these circumstances.”

Keisei patted me on the shoulder as if to console me for the trouble I was going through.

“Well, I do have that protection point though. I didn’t really have any other choice this time. I don’t want to lose or anything, but I’m pretty thankful that nobody has to worry about getting expelled.”

For now, this was the only thing I could say to them.

Whatever the reason, I was the one selfishly leading us into the confrontation with Class A.

“Our opponent is Class A. It wouldn’t be your fault if we lose.”

“Plus, their commander is Sakayanagi-san.”

In this situation, ninety-nine percent of people probably think Sakayanagi will win. In which case, my position in the class wouldn’t change even if I were to lose. On the other hand, if I end up winning, the victory would be credited to Horikita’s excellent leadership and the elaborate strategy she comes up with.

“Yeah... Winning this is probably going to be difficult.”

Keisei crossed his arms and let out a defeated sigh.

At this point, however, Akito said something nobody was expecting.

“Just because we’re up against Class A doesn’t mean it’ll be impossible to win.”

“...Really? Well, it’s not like I actually wanna lose, but...”

“This isn’t some secret plan or strategy, Haruka. Think about it carefully. There’s a way to snatch victory away from Class A, isn’t there?”

With that, Akito began his explanation.

“Back when Chabashira announced the exam, I thought it was unreasonable to ask us to go up against the upper classes. But something Ike happened to say made me think of a way we could make it happen.”

“Something Ike-kun said? Wait, are you talking about when he brought up rock-paper-scissors?”

Reminded of something, Haruka spoke up, causing Akito to nod in agreement.

“At first, I thought it was kind-of a stupid suggestion for an event. But, then I realized that, if we pick an event that revolves around luck, we’d always have around a fifty-percent chance of winning, no matter who we’re up against. I don’t think it’d be a bad idea to come up with five events like Old Maid or Daifugo that rely on luck for the day of the exam.”

Having heard Akito’s explanation, Haruka’s eyes lit up.

“With a strat like that, we’d be on totally equal footing with anyone!”

“Yeah! I don’t think it’s a bad idea either!”

“No... It wouldn't be that simple.”

While the three of them were getting caught up in their excitement, Keisei calmly criticised the idea.

“I won't know for sure without actually doing the calculations, but the chances of us winning with that strategy are something like 5 to 10%.”

“What? That's it? I'm not saying our chances would be like, exactly 50% or anything, but it should be like at least 20 or 30%, right? How hard could it really be for our five events to get chosen and for us to win four of em?”

“We'd have to be incredibly lucky for everything to play out that way, Haruka.”

All five of Class C's events would have to end up getting selected, and we'd have to get lucky enough to win at least four of them. If our odds of winning were an even 50% for each of those five events, our overall probability of winning the exam was...

I took a moment to run the calculations in my head.

There was an 8.33% chance of all five of our events being chosen, and at a 50% win rate, the probability of winning four times would be 18.75%.

Considering that we'd have to make it past both of those conditions, we'd be left with a mere 1.56% chance of coming out on top.

In other words, it wasn't even close to 5%. It's hard to say that relying on luck to win would be a good idea.

That being said, this was only considering everything from a simple, standardized viewpoint where luck was the only thing supporting my calculations.

In reality, various other factors would affect our true chances of winning, but ultimately it's far too detrimental to call this an effective strategy.

This meant we should choose events based on what we're good at, even if it bears somewhat more of a risk.

The fewer events that revolve around luck, the better.

“It's that bad? It was just a thought I had, is all.”

Having realized how naive his suggestion was, Akito scratched at his cheek.

At this point, I noticed Airi was looking at me with concern, and her expression became all the more worried once I turned to face her.

“Kiyotaka-kun... Uhm, are you alright? Being the commander...”

It seemed like Airi had been getting more and more concerned as the difficulty of beating Class A became more and more apparent.

“Yeah Kiyopon. You don’t need to push yourself just cuz you got a Protection Point.”

Haruka spoke up, finishing Airi’s sentence before she could come up with the words.

“Haruka’s right. At the very least, none of us thought there was something going on between you and Sakayanagi. Right guys?”

Everyone nodded. It didn’t feel bad being trusted like this.

“Like, some of our classmates seemed to be kinda suspicious of you still, but Horikita-san’s explanation seemed like it convinced pretty much everyone. I mean, at first I totally thought having a Protection Point would be great, but now it seems like it’d be troublesome to have one, ya know?”

“I’m a little jealous of everyone who got Protection Points, but after seeing the situation Kiyotaka-kun’s in, I feel like I’d just end up losing it right away if I had gotten one...”

At the end of the day, only one person was safe. Everyone else was left to fend for themselves. It wouldn't be easy to maintain safety like that without fully resolving yourself.

In contrast with Airi's timid self-evaluation, Keisei crossed his arms and disagreed.

“For me, I wouldn't give up my Protection Point no matter what anybody says.”

“Even if you end being resented or hated because of it? Because of their jealousy?”

“You're missing the point here. I wouldn't want to give in to stuff like that just because of something that I rightfully won. Instead, Kiyotaka should've done what he could to keep it to protect himself.”

As if he had become the victim here, Keisei indignantly kept his arms crossed.

Akito, who had been silent until now, looked at me and spoke.

“The truth is, fighting against Class A is gonna be tough, so it's probably better that Kiyotaka agreed to take the risk. If it had been anybody else, we

might be seeing our second expulsion here soon, right? Or are you saying that you could've been the commander, Keisei?"

"That... Well, I don't really think so."

Though, it's not like I didn't understand Keisei's frustration. He had probably just wanted to emphasize that we'd have an easier time winning with a more capable student as the commander.

"It's unfortunate that we have to avoid expulsion during this exam too, but I wonder who would've been the best fit as commander without it...? Horikita-san?"

Airi tilted her head as she carefully thought about all of the options.

"Huh, Horikita-san seems about right to me? Or maybe someone like Hirata-kun or Kushida-san? Yukimuu might've done pretty good too."

She listed off a bunch of students who'd have probably gotten consistent results as the class's commander.

"Hirata, huh... I wonder what his deal is."

At this point, Akito seemed to think that continuing to talk about going against Class A would only dampen the mood, so he changed the subject.

“Hey Keisei, how do you see the Class D versus Class B matchup playing out?”

In particular, he brought up the other teams that’d be waging war during this special exam.

“Chances are Class B’s gonna win. Their teamwork is on another level, and overall, they’re a strong class to have to match up against.”

“Yeah! Plus, their commander is Kaneda-kun, not Ryūen-kun.”

They probably thought that there was no need to be afraid of Class D without Ryūen.

However, Ishizaki and the rest of Class D had been looking to fight Class B from the very start. While it’s unexpected, it isn’t something to make light of. If I were in charge of Class D, I would’ve chosen to fight Class B as well. Class A is led by Sakayanagi, and has a number of tough opponents like Katsuragi and Hashimoto. What’s more, their class as a whole has the best academic abilities out of our entire school year. When it comes to Class C, they probably don’t like the idea of going against me. Of course, one could also argue that they’d expect me to keep my presence hidden, but either way, Class D’s specialty is their physical ability, not their academics. In order to make the most out of their strong points, I’d still probably

choose Class B. Though, this wouldn't give them the upper hand or flat-out win the exam for them. It was just their best choice to avoid defeat.

Whether or not Class D can actually win would depend on their decisions moving forward, along with a little bit of luck.

It was nothing more than a small glimmer of hope at this point.

“Hey guys, look at that.”

Haruka whispered to us, notioning over to the entrance of the cafeteria where Hirata had just walked in.

At a glance, his steps were aimless and heavy, kind of like a zombie or somebody possessed by a ghost.

His eyes lacked ambition. The difference between the person we were looking at and his bright, usual self was striking.

“He’s like... seriously ill or something.”

Haruka muttered a few words, but there was simply nothing more to say. Hirata was somebody who had done more for our class than anybody else. The class had gotten through this past year without losing anyone, and Hirata’s actions had undeniably played an important part in that.

“Hirata’s pretty much useless in this special exam. Going up against Class A was already hard enough, but now we’ve also gotta deal with such a large handicap right from the start.”

Keisei’s words sounded a little cold.

“There... There’s nothing we can do, is there?”

Other students have already attempted to approach him plenty of times.

So far, it didn’t seem like anybody had managed to get through to him. Nothing they did seemed to have an effect.

Instead, the situation seemed to be getting even worse because of everyone’s excessive prodding.

Nobody in the Ayanokōji Group was particularly close with Hirata either, so it’s only natural that our voices wouldn’t be able to reach him.

For that very reason, none of us saw the need to overreact to what Keisei was implying. It was somebody else’s problem.

Part 1

After school, the full-fledged discussion was finally just about to begin. Nobody moved from their seats as the bell rang with the exception of Hirata, who stood up immediately.

“Hirata-kun!”

“H-Hirata-kun!”

Several of the girls raised their voices and shouted out to him. Among them was Mii-chan.

But Hirata didn't stop. It seemed like he didn't care what would happen to the class anymore.

He was just going to school, attending his classes, and heading back home, as if he was trying to avoid getting involved with the rest of the class.

He was probably just going to repeat this cycle over and over again.

“Wait a second, Hirata-kun!”

“You guys are the ones who should wait.”

Mii-chan and the others tried to chase after him, but Horikita's words stopped them in their tracks.

“We’re about to have a discussion. Do you want even more people to miss out on it?”

“B-but...”

“There’s nothing any of us can do for him right now. Hurry up and return to your seats.”

Horikita suppressed their desire to chase after him and motioned for everyone to return to their seats.

Right now, our top priority was getting everyone on board with establishing the class policy for the exam.

“Kōenji’s still here somehow?”

Given that Kōenji’s participation was entirely unexpected, Sudō’s voice was filled with surprise.

“Fufufu. I’m part of the class, am I not? Of course I’m here.”

Kōenji spoke shamelessly, as if everything he was saying was completely natural.

“However, I’d like to wrap up this discussion today. I’m quite the busy person myself.”

“That’ll be difficult. This special exam isn’t something that can be decided overnight. Even if we decide on the events today, we’ll have to persistently practice them in order to win.”

Horikita, taking a stand behind the teacher’s podium, completely shut Kōenji down.

Kōenji didn’t object any further and simply sat at his desk with a broad smile on his face.

For the time being, he seemed to be willing to hear her out.

“If that’s the case, it seems I’ll only be participating this one time.”

Kōenji didn’t waver even slightly. It seemed that, class policy aside, he had no intention of working through this together. Sudō silently began to stand up, but immediately sat back down after receiving a firm glare from Horikita. After all, if he were to start something here, the conversation would never move forward.

“Then, I’ll just have to do what I can to try and get you to participate next time too.”

Kōenji took Horikita's warning with a smile and simply crossed his arms and legs.

This was his way of telling her to continue with the discussion.

“Uhm, Horikita. I've got a simple question about event participation I wanna ask you.”

“And what is that, Ike-kun?”

His hand raised, Ike spoke up.

“We'll be competing in seven events, right? But, like, we won't have a turn at it, will we?”

“What do you mean by ‘we won't have a turn at it’?”

“Erm... Well, to put it simply, I mean those of us who kinda suck? Like, the students who aren't particularly good at physical stuff or studying aren't gonna have a turn to participate. It's not like all seven events are gonna need a whole buncha people. If we pick events that only need a few skilled people to participate, a whole bunch of us won't really have anything to do, right?”

There are nearly forty students in each class.

Even if we chose a few events that needed a lot of people, the final seven would probably only need twenty to thirty.

In other words, Ike seemed to be trying to say that, depending on the participation requirements of the selected events, nearly half of the class wouldn't end up having to participate.

“I dunno about that. What if an event needs like, twenty people or something?”

Kei spoke up, slipping in her own opinion after Ike finished.

“You're sooo stupid, Karuizawa. You can play football with like, eleven people on a team. What event could need more than that? I can't think of a single one, can you?”

“Uhm~... Somethin' like baseball?”

“Baseball only needs ten people, which is even less than football!”

“Baseball needs nine people.”

Horikita immediately cut in, sharply pointing out Ike's inconsistency.

“...Well, my point still stands either way.”

“I dunno Kanji. American football needs eleven people like football does, and rugby needs fifteen.”

Sudō listed off a few events that would require more than ten people.

“Yeah, but like, do you want to force people to play rugby or something? I don’t even know the rules!”

While rugby was by no means a minor sport, it was in completely uncharted territory to people who weren’t involved with it. It’s not something regularly taught in gym class, and I’m sure that Class A was no exception to this either.

I could hardly imagine what it’d be like for us to start practicing rugby right now.

Besides, even if we submitted it as an event, it’s doubtful that it would be accepted, and it wouldn’t be very beneficial for anyone.

“So, that’s why I don’t think we’ll need to participate.”

“What’s your point here?”

“That... Well, I just don’t think we need to meet up like this or hold practice sessions moving forward or anything.”

“I understand that you want to take it easy. After all, it’s mentally taxing to do something you don’t want to do. Besides, it’d also cut down on your precious break time.”

“I-I wouldn’t go as far as to say that, but you know...”

“Either way, I’ve determined that all of us need to work together.”

“How about you tell us why that is. I’ll do my best to support you if you can convince me.”

This time, Sudō was the one who spoke.

“Because how many people we’ll need to participate depends on the rules our opponent comes up with. For example, let’s say one of the events they propose is volleyball. Usually, volleyball is a competition between two teams of six, but the rules are allowed to change that to some extent. What if the match had a time limit of thirty minutes, and the rules stated that every ten minutes all of the participants had to change out with somebody new? I wonder what would happen then?”

“Erm... With six people changing out every ten minutes, that’s...”

Eighteen people with that alone. Nearly half of the students in each class would have to participate.

Moreover, because there were only six people needed at any given time, the rule would be simple and easy to follow for pretty much anybody. The school would most likely approve of it as well.

“What if there’s more than one event like this? Put simply, everyone would be forced to participate in two or possibly even three events. We need to be prepared for something like that.”

Of course, this all depended on the events and rules that Class A would come up with.

It was more than possible that they might mix in a few fake events like this, just to make it more difficult for us.

“I know this hasn’t quite clicked with all of you yet, but this special exam is more complicated than you’re making it out to be.”

If we were to go over each event one at a time, we’d eventually come up with some ideas that seem rather ridiculous.

At this point, it wouldn’t be that unusual for there to be strange ideas for events like rock-paper-scissors or poker.

After all, getting those crucial four wins would be far more important than trying to make yourself look good.

Regardless of how impractical the suggestions might seem to be, picking out the right people for events we know they can win is what mattered most in the end.

“I don’t even plan on taking up too much of your time.”

Or rather, it might be better for her to say that keeping everybody stuck here doesn’t necessarily mean we’d come up with good ideas right away.

“So for today, I’d like to leave everyone here with some homework. If possible, I want you to come up with ideas for events you’re good at and events where you think you’d absolutely never lose, and give them to me by after school tomorrow. It doesn’t matter if it’s something you do alone or if it’s done in a team.”

One of the five events that we end up picking needed to be a one-on-one event. Odds are that every single class would put one forward with the unshakable confidence that they wouldn’t lose it. However, when looked at from another angle, the damage done if you didn’t win would be immeasurable. That being the case, students with special skills or talents that can’t be outdone by others were highly desirable in this situation.

“But, there’s no point unless it’s something the school’d approve of, right? I don’t really understand what their standards are.”

Events and rules that are overly obscure would be turned down by the school.

However, the lack of clarity when it comes to that was probably an issue for many students.

“Don’t worry about that right now. That’s something we can think about after we’ve heard all of the ideas. For now, just feel free to suggest anything that comes to mind.”

“Then, you’re saying you’d even be fine with stuff like video games or karaoke?”

“Yes. Anything.”

Horikita stressed this point once again, telling the class that they didn’t have to worry. I had no issues with how she was handling the situation.

It was important for us to start by finding out what everybody’s strengths were.

“What do we do if there’s nothing we’re really good at?”

Haruka chimed in with a question for Horikita.

“I don’t mind you not having anything if you’re not very confident in yourself. It’d be risky to use an event if you lack confidence in your ability to win it.”

I wanted them to come up with as many events as possible, but I wasn’t sure if we had enough time to be careful with our selection. For the time being, I didn’t have any issues with Horikita’s plan, so I felt like it would be alright to just wait and see what happens.

With that, the discussion ended for the day and everyone began to gather their things and leave. At this point, Kōenji spoke up again.

“You’re fine with ending the discussion so early like this?”

“If it’s this short, it’ll be easier for you to participate next time, won’t it Kōenji-kun?”

“When I say I’ll participate one time, one time is as much as I’ll participate.”

“...But, it’ll be problematic if you don’t do the assignment I gave you today. If you don’t, it would be rather hard to say you participated, wouldn’t it?”

“Come up with ideas for events I’m good at, was it?”

He put his hand to his chin and let show an unwavering smile.

“Yes. If you want to say you’ve participated, you at least have to do that.”

Horikita was looking to force him to participate a second time if he couldn’t.

Kōenji elegantly stood up from his desk before proceeding to announce something to Horikita.

“There’s simply nothing I can’t do. I am a perfect human, after all.”

“No matter who you’re up against or what the event is, you’re absolutely certain you’ll win. Are you sure about that?”

Her words were filled with one-part provocation, and one-part intrigue, as if she couldn’t help but look forward to how Kōenji would respond.

“I see. You want me to pledge that I’ll win any event I participate in, don’t you?”

“That’s right. If you can do that, you’re free to do whatever you want. You wouldn’t have to participate in any more discussions, and I won’t ask you to give your input on anything.”

“H-hey Suzune.”

Sudō spoke up, alarmed by her outrageous proposal, but Horikita just continued.

“But keep in mind, if you don’t participate or if you lose... I’ll be suspicious of anything you say, and your classmates’ distrust of you will skyrocket.”

Horikita’s idea wasn’t bad. With this, she was looking to make full use of Kōenji on the day of the exam. Kōenji is a top-notch student when it comes to both academics and physical ability. His only problem had to do with his personality. It would be better to bear with him now than have him not show up on the day of the exam or take his event frivolously.

The question was: how exactly would Kōenji respond? He stood from his seat and began to walk out of the classroom, but just before he walked through the door, he stopped.

“I’ll leave you with this. You’d best not think that you can bind me with words like that. While I am indeed an unrivaled genius who wouldn’t lose to anyone, it’s up to me to decide whether or not I use that talent for you.”

Put simply, Kōenji’s response was a no. It didn’t matter to him if he was suspected or if the class distrusted him. He was just going to do whatever he wanted.

With that, Kōenji turned around and walked out of the classroom.

“...Ordinary methods aren’t going to work with him at all, huh.”

“That guy... He’s gotta lotta nerve underestimating us like that. Spouting out nonsense that he’s some unrivaled genius who wouldn’t lose to anyone. I’d kick his ass at basketball if he had me as his opponent.”

I could fully understand why Sudō was speaking about him like that.

No matter how talented and brilliant a person is, it wouldn’t be accurate to call them perfect.

In fact, it raises a question. Would Kōenji win if he faced off against Sudō at basketball?

“If he puts in the effort on exam day he might show results, at least to a certain extent. I don’t know how much I was able to get through to him, but I guess we’ll just have to wait and see. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, but...”

It was definitely hard to imagine Kōenji losing. After flaunting us with those grandiose words and that self-confidence of his, the thought of him losing, even for a moment, feels like putting the cart before the horse. Sudō was probably well aware of this too.

“...But, do you think he’s even gonna show up at all?”

“Who knows.”

While we can win if he takes it seriously, if he doesn’t, we won’t.

Part 2

The next day. Horikita informed me of something when she arrived at school in the morning.

“I’ve decided not to consider Hirata-kun as an asset, at least for this exam.”

Yesterday, even Kōenji had participated in the after-school discussion, but Hirata had just silently left the classroom.

Having witnessed this firsthand, Horikita’s decision was understandable.

“That’s reasonable. He’s too unstable to rely on right now.”

Even if we could force him to participate, it would probably only end up backfiring on us.

“It’ll be fine if it’s just for this exam, but depending on the situation, this behavior of his might continue for quite a while.”

Her concern was not an exaggeration in the slightest.

Pretty much everyone was hoping for his recovery, but for the time being, it was unclear just how that was going to happen.

“If you think his behavior isn’t going to stop any time soon, there’s still the option of getting him to drop out, isn’t there?”

I brought up another idea, and while she was somewhat surprised by it, she reacted calmly.

“That’s... Well, that may be something I’ll have to think about. It’s at least a relief that he didn’t throw everything away and suddenly say he wanted to become the commander this time.”

The thought of Hirata nominating himself as the commander for this special exam wasn’t that unreasonable.

If he had, he would’ve been able to lose on purpose and get himself expelled. It would’ve been as simple as that.

However, even if he doesn’t have any lingering attachments to this school, he still wouldn’t want to cause problems for others, which was why he didn’t take on the position in the first place.

The reason why he was just passively doing what he had to every day was probably because the class would be penalized if he dropped out. He was looking to leave when the time was right, without stirring up trouble for the rest of us.

However, this was just how he was acting right now.

“But- That doesn’t necessarily mean he’ll always be acting like this, right? Who knows when he’ll get desperate...?”

“Yeah.”

As Horikita said, I didn’t know what Hirata would do if he became self-destructive either.

I couldn’t say for sure that the class would stay completely intact when he drops out.

“That’s why I don’t want to force him to participate right now. He’s a bomb that could go off at any moment, and I’d like to unify the class so he doesn’t explode on us.”

Out of everything, Hirata hated internal conflict the most.

So in order to avoid causing more of it, Horikita had been taking an active role within our class since the exam first started.

“Sounds rough.”

“You’ve taken on the responsibilities of the commander, so you’re going to have it rough too.”

“I’ll leave all of that to you. I’m the commander, but I’m sure you’ll be able to come up with adequate enough ideas.”

She glared at me with an irritated look in her eyes.

“Can you beat Sakayanagi-san with that kind of attitude?”

“Who knows.”

“Who knows...? I, for one, intend to win. Could I get you to be a little more involved in making that happen?”

I was well aware that there was no need for her to be telling me that.

“Are you asking me to be actively involved with the class and decide on the participants for the events or the rules about how the commander will be allowed to intervene in them? Try and imagine what that would be like.”

As I spoke, Horikita’s expression gradually tightened.

“...I can’t imagine it at all, almost to the point where it’s terrifying.”

“Right?”

To the rest of the class, I was just a shadow. Even though I had become the commander, this was a fact that wasn’t going to change.

People would think there's something wrong with me if I suddenly started rattling off instructions about everything.

I would take on a more active role, using the strategy Horikita comes up with as a baseline.

As the two of us were talking, I felt a sudden change in the atmosphere of the classroom.

Hirata had come to school. Although many students made an effort to avoid looking at him directly, it was clear that they were still worried about him.

“G-good morning, Hirata-kun!”

He was very nearly late for the start of school, and Mii-chan proceeded to call out to him. It was a brave decision, done in spite of the negative atmosphere of the classroom. However, her attempt to reach out was disregarded and ignored.

Hirata quietly took his seat without reacting to anyone around him.

But even so, Mii-chan's smile didn't waver.

“Who could've imagined that this would happen now?”

“Really.”

Despite Mii-chan's best efforts, Hirata's self-isolation continued.

"All things considered, she's the only one who hasn't given up on reaching out to Hirata-kun. I didn't think she had such a deep connection with him, but..."

Horikita had noticed that Mii-chan was especially concerned when it came to Hirata, and she seemed to be starting to wonder about why Mii-chan would push herself to do something like that.

"It's because she's compassionate, isn't it?"

"That wouldn't make sense unless she treated other people this way as well."

"That's fair."

If that was the reason, Mii-chan would've probably been more compassionate back when Yamauchi was about to be expelled.

That being the case, there was only one reason left that would explain why she kept reaching out to Hirata.

"Maybe it's love."

“I suppose that’s the only possibility left... What a truly worthless sentiment.”

Horikita crossed her arms out of exasperation and shook her head as if to say she couldn’t understand.

“Perhaps we should limit the class resources we’re willing to spare on dealing with him... What do you think?”

In other words, she was saying to have everyone leave Hirata alone for a fixed period of time.

“Wouldn’t that be difficult?”

“Not at all. Nobody takes the initiative to reach out to him anymore except for her.”

Hirata was even choosing to ignore Mii-chan, the one who had been the most devoted to him.

Given the situation, there certainly wouldn’t be very many students who’d be willing to do even more for him.

“Motive aside, I hope she forgets about it somehow.”

Horikita was probably thinking about how she could get Mii-chan to give up.

“If this is as far as it goes, I’m not going to complain about it either. But it’s clearly starting to take its toll on her.”

“Well, it’s true she hasn’t really been herself recently.”

Besides, the class’s atmosphere worsens every time Hirata’s situation comes up.

Hirata had pretty firmly disregarded Mii-chan a few moments ago, but it doesn’t seem like she was discouraged by it, as she approached him a second time.

“Uhm, Hirata-kun, today at lunch-”

This time, it looked like Mii-chan had reached out to invite him to eat lunch together, but...

“Could you please leave me alone already?”

“...!”

Hirata’s relatively harsh words echoed throughout the classroom.

He had flatly rejected Mii-chan's request before she could even finish her sentence.

“It's annoying.”

While his words weren't as harsh as they could've been, his voice contained nothing but cold emotion.

“Th-that, I... just wanted... to eat lunch, together with you...”

Mii-chan tried as hard as she could to keep smiling, but the tense emotions eventually got to her and she just couldn't hold onto it any longer.

“I'm not eating. Not with you.”

His rejection couldn't have been more explicit.

Not wanting to see Hirata acting like this, many of the girls in the classroom quickly looked away.

“Hey, hold on Yōsuke-kun. Isn't that kinda going a bit too far?”

At this point, Kei chose to speak up. No, given the situation, it may be more accurate to say she had been forced to.

I could easily imagine the scene of Kei's friends asking her if she could do something. If Hirata pulled back now, not only would Kei save face, but the class would also temporarily regain its composure.

However-

“Would you mind not calling me by my given name so intimately like that? You don't have anything to do with me anymore, alright?”

“T-that's true... Then, Hirata-kun, you went way too far with what you said to Mii-chan.”

Kei corrected herself, but still confidently addressed Hirata.

She played her role as the leader who brings the girls together perfectly.

“Compared to how you normally talk to others, there isn't much of a difference.”

Hirata's rebuttal was merciless.

“Wh...! F-for the sake of the class, I-!”

“Could you be quiet already? If you don't... You know what'll happen, yes?”

Hirata forcibly blocked Kei from trying to say anything further.

His words were a threat; If she carelessly said anything more than this, he'd expose absolutely everything.

At least, it was inevitable that Kei would take it that way, given that she had shared her weaknesses with Hirata.

“What? Ugh, how annoying. I don't care anymore.”

Now that it had come to this, there was nothing more Kei could do.

She backed down, albeit reluctantly.

“How long do you plan on standing there?”

Only moments after completely destroying Kei, Hirata changed his sights back to a crying, motionless Mii-chan. Having been completely rejected, Mii-chan returned to her seat with her head hung.

Hirata must've thought that, by doing this, Mii-chan would never reach out to him again.

“The entire class is demoralized...”

“Kōenji doesn't seem to mind at all, though.”

Throughout the gloomy classroom, one student was clearly unaffected by what had happened.

Even while Mii-chan, Hirata, and Kei were in the midst of quarreling, he seemed to be fully concentrated on grooming himself.

Kōenji simply made one comment.

“Why must so many problem children be in my class?”

I wanted to say that I thought he was a problem child himself, but I held myself back.

Part 3

No matter how bad the atmosphere may get, time still moves forward all the same.

Naturally, the time for discussion arrived once classes had finished for the day.

It was the second class discussion. To be precise, it was actually the third if I included the one I hadn't attended.

It had already been three days since the exam started, so it was about time to get the ball rolling.

Once again, Hirata immediately stood up and walked out of the classroom.

Mii-chan seemed a little torn, as she just watched quietly while he left the room.

Then, as if inspired by something, she quickly sprung to her feet.

However, she didn't move a single step forward.

Hirata's rejection earlier this morning had probably come to mind, stopping her in her tracks.

After a bit, her legs gave in and she sat back down in her chair.

“As she should...”

Horikita spoke softly; her cruel, yet gentle words just barely reaching my ears. It would be better to stay away from Hirata right now. Horikita, as well as the rest of the class, understood that this was for the best.

In the past, some of the class’s more jealous boys would vent their complaints about Hirata, but I couldn’t hear any of that now. I had thought they were the type of people who’d look down on him now that he’s fallen out of line. Or perhaps they weren’t willing to say anything negative because it’s Hirata?

“Mii-chan, wanna go home together after the discussion today?”

Having anticipated Mii-chan’s mental state, Kushida reached out with a friendly invitation.

“She’s fairly reliable in a situation like this, isn’t she?”

“I guess.”

Kushida wasn’t the type of person who’d neglect a friend in need.

If she couldn’t save Hirata, she’d at least want to save Mii-chan.

Even if her motive was to make herself look good, it was fine as long as she actually helped her.

Mii-chan accepted Kushida's invitation with a small nod.

“Well then, I'll also be excusing myself.”

Sure enough, Kōenji didn't seem to have any intention to participate either, as he proceeded to leave the classroom just after Hirata.

He seemed both unashamed and confident, as if he had already been given permission to leave from Horikita.

Ultimately, it seemed that the discussion would take place with only thirty-seven people.

Horikita kept her eyes locked on Kōenji until he walked out. Only then did she rise from her seat and take her place at the teacher's podium.

Chabashira cast a sidelong glance at Horikita before taking her leave as well.

“Now, I wonder if you've all come up with something you're good at?”

“Wait a moment, Horikita-san. There's something I'd like to bring to your attention before the discussion.”

Keisei was the first person to raise their hand.

“What is it, Yukimura-kun?”

“I’m worried someone might eavesdrop on our discussion.”

Even though we were behind closed doors, we could still be heard if someone was lingering about in the nearby hallway.

“Yes. We’re not even allowed to have a single, decent discussion at this school, are we?”

“Shouldn’t we take preemptive measures? Like having a few of us stand guard or something? I honestly think it’s a problem for us to talk like this without doing anything.”

“Yes, you’re quite right.”

Having known this already, Horikita nodded her head.

“But I don’t think having people stand guard will be an effective countermeasure.”

“...Why?”

“By having people stand guard, do you plan on having them warn others not to approach the classroom? The hallway is a shared space that all students can use equally. No, strictly speaking, this very classroom is too. We have no right to deny access to students from the other classes.”

Horikita was saying that, if we prevented others from using the hallways, there was a chance they might make a complaint to the school.

“That’s why having some of us stand guard would be nothing but a waste of time.”

“Then, you’re fine with everything we talk about getting leaked? All of our strengths and weaknesses? We don’t gain a single thing by giving away all of our information for free.”

“We’ll work around that using these.”

Horikita took out her cell phone and showed it to the class.

“I’ll set up a class-wide group chat dedicated to this special exam. While we can still share our opinions verbally, we’ll communicate the important details in the chat. This way, it won’t matter if the other classes eavesdrop or not.”

Hearing her idea, Keisei nodded along as if totally convinced.

“I see... If that’s the case, I think it should be alright.”

“Then, may I contact everyone and make the group?”

The one who offered to do so was Kushida, to which Horikita had no objection.

It would be no exaggeration to say she was the only person here who knew everyone’s contact information.

“Uhm-”

Mii-chan rose to her feet, cutting into Horikita and Keisei’s conversation.

“Excuse me. Today, I... Uh, I’ve got something to do, so...”

“By that... are you saying you want to chase after Hirata-kun?”

Mii-chan nodded her head slightly in response to Kushida’s question.

With heavy steps, she began to walk out of the room, trying to once again follow after Hirata.

“Wait. There’s no point in doing something like that right now.”

“That... What do you mean?”

Mii-chan responded to Horikita with a question, the tone of her voice unexpectedly intense.

“He’s useless and broken right now. You’re going to get dragged down right along with him.”

“I, I don’t want to abandon Hirata-kun.”

“I’m not telling you that you have to abandon him or anything like that. Only that he should be left alone for now.”

“Then when are you going to help him?”

“...That’s up to him.”

“You’re wrong. That’s... not true... I don’t believe you!”

With that, Mii-chan went out of the classroom, unwilling to listen to anyone.

“Good grief. He just needs to be left alone.”

Of course, none of us were going to chase after her.

“I’m going to have to excuse myself for a moment. None of you leave, just wait for me to get back.”

Horikita left the classroom as well, making it clear she intended to go after Mii-chan and bring her back.

She probably thought that there was no way she could leave this to somebody else.

“What a mess... We can’t even have one proper discussion because of Hirata.”

It was understandable why Keisei wanted to complain like this.

After all, it had been three days now, and we still hadn’t made any progress yet. I stood up from my seat.

“Oi Ayanokōji, are you gonna chase after ‘em too? Suzune said to wait for her.”

Sudō gave me a clear warning. Indeed, it was only going to get worse if more of us kept leaving like this.

“I know.”

“You know? Oi!”

Disregarding Sudō, I walked out of the classroom and called out to Horikita who had just begun walking down the corridor.

“Horikita.”

“...I thought I was clear when I said for none of you to leave.”

“If you’re trying to force Mii-chan to come back, you don’t have to be the one to do it. I’ll go. You’re the one in charge of bringing the class together.”

“And you’re the commander. That’s not something you can push on to someone else, now is it? You won’t be able to make full use of the position if you don’t analyze everyone’s capabilities.”

“You can handle that for me later. There’s nothing I can do about it anyway.”

“That’s not the problem here...”

“Do you really think you can fix Hirata’s problem?”

“That’s...”

“Somebody who thinks that leaving Hirata alone is the best course of action probably shouldn’t be the one to chase after them.”

Horikita, one of the driving forces that had led Hirata to his current state, shouldn’t be the one to approach him.

“Then... Are you saying you think you can?”

“It depends on more than just me.”

“Then something should’ve been done about this a long time ago.”

Many students had reached out due to their concern. It wasn’t just Mii-chan.

Horikita was beginning to question Mii-chan’s behavior because she had convinced herself that nothing would manage to get through to him.

“Well, we’ll talk later. I’ll lose track of them if we continue this now.”

“Come back soon.”

She spoke like a mother would when seeing off their child. Just as I began walking, I bumped into Hashimoto.

It didn’t seem to be a mere coincidence either... I found myself wondering if he was here to keep a watch on our class.

It was even possible that he had overheard my conversation with Horikita.

He didn’t seem surprised. Instead, he just called out to me with a grin on his face that made it seem like he had witnessed something amusing.

“Yo Ayanokōji.”

Nonetheless, I didn’t have time to talk with him right now.

“Sorry. I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

“If you’re going after your classmate, she ran off that way.”

I responded to him with a light nod and proceeded to go after Mii-chan.

These last two days, Hirata’s behavior hadn’t changed at all.

It was a safe bet that he had gone back to his room at the dorms as fast as possible so he could avoid running into anybody after school.

Part 4

Shortly after leaving the school building, I spotted Mii-chan.

And just slightly ahead of her, I could see Hirata heading back to the dorms.

Even though Mii-chan had gathered the courage to follow after Hirata earlier, it didn't seem like she had called out to him yet.

She probably still hadn't gotten over his rejection from earlier this morning.

"You aren't going to call out to him?"

"...Ayanokōji-kun."

Mii-chan noticed me.

I caught up and began walking alongside her, the two of us focusing on Hirata up ahead.

"I'm... just a bit intimidated..."

This was understandable, considering the fact he had shut her down not too long ago.

“Then why did you chase after him? Everyone else already gave up on him.”

“That’s... I don’t really know why.”

She didn’t seem to have thought about this very deeply, as she only just now began to think about why she continued to chase after Hirata.

I didn’t think it was just because she liked him.

After pondering for a while, it seemed like she had come up with an answer.

“Everyone’s saying that Hirata-kun should be left alone right now, but... I don’t think that’s true. Because he’s going through something so difficult, so painful, I feel like we absolutely have to help him... That’s why I came after him.”

“Then, it doesn’t matter if he comes to hate you because of it?”

It was fine the first few times, but if she kept this up, Hirata’s response would only get more and more severe.

There was no guarantee that he wouldn’t end up yelling at her next time.

“...No.”

Recalling Hirata's attitude last time, Mii-chan shook her head.

"I don't want that, but... but if hating me makes Hirata-kun feel like he isn't alone, even if it's just a little... even if he hates me forever... then I'm fine with being hated!"

She was trying to seem strong. Trying to seem strong to protect her heart from breaking.

However, I found myself thinking that the powerful, determined look in her eyes was unmistakably the real thing.

"Am I making a mistake, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"No. You're right."

Leaving Hirata alone right now wouldn't make the situation any better.

If we did, we'd be trapping him in a darkness that he wouldn't be able to escape from.

"So, are you going to go talk to him?"

"Yes!"

Once again, Mii-chan put one foot in front of the other.

She ran toward Hirata, closing the distance between them.

Horikita probably wouldn't be very happy with me about this, but for now, it was the best course of action.

To drive Hirata into a corner, Mii-chan's kindness would be the most effective.

And soon, his spirit would break, forcing him to drop out of school of his own accord.

As I made my way back, Hashimoto noticed me while playing around with his phone near our classroom.

“Yo.”

“You manage to steal any information from Class C?”

“Nope, unfortunately. Can't get my hands on anything with them texting each other the important bits over the phone.”

Hashimoto shrugged and put away his phone.

From the looks of it, he had learned about Horikita's strategy because of his eavesdropping.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come back. How’d it go? Chasing after your classmate, that is.”

“As you can see, I’ve returned empty-handed.”

I emphasized the fact that I hadn’t been able to bring Mii-chan back.

“Must be hard to get everyone working together, eh?”

“Bringing the class together is Horikita’s job. She’s the one who has it hard.”

“Did you have to become the commander because of your protection point?”

Hashimoto was giving me a hard time with his chatty behavior. It seemed like he was looking to find out at least a little information from me since he wasn’t getting much from the class.

“We’re up against Class A. We had no chance from the start. Since there’s no way around the expulsion, I didn’t think there was any other choice.”

“I see, you do have a point there.”

Even though Hashimoto didn’t seem convinced, he began to walk away as if he had given up.

“I came to do a bit of reconnaissance even though our princess said not to. Still, I figured I’d pick up whatever info I could, but it looks like I was just being stupid, huh?”

He gave me a light pat on my shoulder before proceeding to walk off somewhere. I followed him with my eyes until he was out of sight and then went back into the classroom where the discussion on choosing the events was underway. With my eyes, I conveyed to Horikita that I hadn’t been able to get Mii-chan to return and sat back down in my seat. She didn’t say anything about it.

The discussion in the group chat had already progressed reasonably well, with more than half of the class having shared their responses to Horikita’s homework.

It seemed to be headed in the direction I had expected, based on everything I knew about the class and the information I had gotten from Kei. First, there were sporting events that everybody was good at, with things like Sudō being good at basketball, Onodera with swimming, and Akito with archery. Then, the students who were confident in their academic abilities like Horikita and Keisei listed off subjects that they felt they could score particularly high marks in. However, unlike sports where people focus their talent and specialize in something, it would be very difficult to include an

academic event unless the person is considerably skilled in a certain subject.

“Ayanokōji-kun, were there any students from the other classes in the hallway?”

“It seemed like there was until a moment ago, but he left once he realized we had started the discussion on our phones.”

“I see. Well that’s the obvious thing to do I guess.”

Having understood that nobody was eavesdropping any more, Sudō made his move.

“Basketball! We should definitely include basketball!”

Sudō appealed directly to Horikita.

“I don’t doubt your ability. Are you sure you won’t lose, no matter who you go against?”

“There are tons of ways to compete in basketball. If we pick a one-on-one, I’ll definitely win.”

Basketball is typically played on the court in a five-on-five match.

That said, there are several derivations of the sport, including the one-on-one match Sudō was advocating for. With solid rules, the event would probably be enough to get approved by the school.

“You’re not wrong. I have no doubts about your abilities as a basketball player. It’s a safe bet to think that you’ll win if we put you one-on-one against somebody.”

“Exactly.”

“However, for this special exam, it won’t be so simple.”

“W-what? Why?”

“Because we can only choose one event that requires one person from each class.”

One of the exam’s rules was that we couldn’t submit two events that required the same number of people.

“If we were allowed to choose as many one-man events as we wanted, those are the only type of events we’d end up choosing. As an example, Onodera-san is exceptionally good at swimming. If we’re just trying to win, having her swim in a one-man swimming event would suffice as well.”

With this, we could secure a win for one of the events.

Of course, there was a risk that Onodera would have to compete against a boy, but her competition times were good enough that it probably wouldn't matter.

“When it comes to English, Wang-san consistently gets nearly perfect marks. There are a number of students in this class who'd have a high chance of winning if they compete in a one-on-one environment that they specialize in.”

Having thought he'd be the one to bring the class to victory, Sudō's expression clouded over a little.

“I'm just a beginner when it comes to basketball, so I'll simply ask out of curiosity. Let's say there's a standard basketball match, that is, a five-on-five, and your four other teammates are unathletic girls. Would you still be able to win, no matter who your opponents are?”

“Honestly, I'm pretty confident I can carry on my own against a team of weaklings... But, if they've got experienced players... I can't say for sure, ya know?”

“How sincere. Frankly put, I respect the fact that you chose not to boast empty words about your abilities in this situation. That's why...”

Horikita was saying this as a preface for what she was about to lead into.

“You should put some thought into it as well. It’d be a shame if we had to give up on a basketball event. So, it’ll be up to you to choose teammates that you think you can win a five-on-five event with, provided that you seek to use as few resources as possible. If I’m satisfied with your choices, I promise I’ll submit the event to the school.”

“...Okay.”

Sudō nodded, taking Horikita’s words head-on.

And then, he sat back down in his seat to think over his options.

That was the hard part. Sudō is skilled at athletics. While there was no doubt he was at his best in a game of basketball, he could also participate in other sports.

In an exam like this one, he was a trump card who could be used in a variety of physical events.

There was another important aspect to consider here too. Namely, that it’d be a pity to use a trump card like him on a simple one-on-one event.

Besides, we should probably take the time to really consider whether or not to use basketball as one of our events. Even if we had a decent chance of winning in a five-on-five match, our opponents aren’t stupid. If basketball

is one of our ten events, Class A would easily predict that Sudō would be taking part in it.

Then, they could probably steal the win from Sudō by putting together a solid five-man team of their own. Conversely, there was also the chance that they might completely give up on the basketball event so they could focus their resources on winning the other ones.

Just like that, Horikita and everyone else proceeded to hold many conversations similar to this.

I turned off my phone and pretended to keep track of the group chat by silently staring at the blank screen.

After all, as the commander, I wouldn't be asked about my strengths and weaknesses.

My participation in these discussions was merely a formality. My policy of leaving all the details to Horikita hadn't changed.

After about an hour of discussion, Horikita had finished gathering up everyone's information. Moving forward, she was probably going to focus more on individual one-on-one meetings instead of all of us gathering together as a whole.

Part 5

Thursday morning, on the way to school...

Even though spring was approaching, today seemed colder than usual.

“Good morning! Good morning! It’s so chilly~”

Behind me, I could hear a cheerful, energetic voice.

I didn’t think they were calling out to me, but when I ignored it and continued walking, they became flustered and called out once more.

“W-wait a minute!? Ayanokōji-kun?”

Apparently, the greeting from earlier had been addressed to me after all.

I turned around to see Hoshinomiya-sensei, Class B’s homeroom teacher.

“Wait up already~”

Her cold hand took hold of my own.

I found myself wondering what kind of female teacher just casually takes a male student’s hand like this.

“My apologies. I didn’t realize you were talking to me. Is something the matter?”

“Do I need a reason to say hi to you?”

With my hand still in hers, she looked up at me with upturned eyes.

Only someone who knew just how cute they were would act like this.

Perhaps I was beginning to catch on to this type of behavior because I had made a habit of watching Kushida’s every move.

“It’s not that, it’s just...”

With a little force, I pulled my hand away and shook free from her grip.

For some reason, she grinned with a wicked smile upon seeing my reaction.

“Hey, hey. At least you’ve gotten yourself a girlfriend, right?”

“Nope. I’m not sure I’ll even be able to.”

“Huh? Really? Even though you’ve been blessed with such a perfect environment? What a waste.”

I had no idea what she was getting at.

“Aiya~ You don’t understand, do you?”

Hoshinomiya-sensei leaned in closer and whispered ‘That’s no fun.’ straight into my ear.

“The students here are in like, suuuch a good, romantic environment, you know?”

“Why is that?”

When I asked this, Hoshinomiya-sensei jolted back just a little.

“You really don’t understand?”

“Yes. Not in the least.”

After I spoke, she patted me on the shoulder a few times as if to console me.

“Ya know, in a different light, you do look kinda adorable.”

At this point, I had no idea what she was trying to get at. Not in the slightest.

“Lemme first let you in on a little secret... I’m not a fan of how things are these days. I’ve been thinking about this for a while now, but I think it’s problematic to let boys and girls stay in the same dorm.”

“Is that so?”

The individual rooms are separated, so I didn't really see any problems with it. I put some distance between us, trying to escape from having to hear her each and every breath. Or at least I tried to, as Hoshinomiya-sensei simply shortened it once again.

“Here's what I heard from a friend of mine. Apparently there's a tradition at a certain company where new hires undergo a two-month long training session in a company dormitory. Two people per room, separated by gender, of course.”

“Huh.”

Every time I tried to distance myself, she would come back even closer, so I decided to give up and just listen to her talk.

“But, there's bound to be trouble when two people live in the same room. There was one guy who really hated natto. Like, not only did he hate the smell of the stuff, he hated the thought of even looking at it. So, the first thing he said to the guy he was rooming with was ‘don't you dare eat natto in front of me.’ But the thing was, his roommate LOVED natto. The roommate figured that, even though the guy said he hated natto, it wasn't like he was gonna be forced to eat it or anything. So on their first day living

together, he ate some natto right in front of his roommate, and as a result, the guy who hated natto got pissed and stormed out of the dorm.”

What in the world was she trying to say? It didn’t sound like it had very much to do with boys and girls living in the same dorm.

“I know you think I’ve gone off on a tangent, but this is important.”

With that, Hoshinomiya-sensei continued.

“The company caught wind of the incident and abolished the room-sharing system that year. Starting that next year, every new hire would get their own one-person room, just like the dorms here at this school. But as a result, something changed drastically that year compared to the year before. Can you guess what?”

“Is it the problem with boys and girls you were talking about?”

“Yup. With the room-sharing system, there would only be at most one or two couples. But when they switched to having one room per person, there ended up being more like seven or eight. When you share a room, even if you invited your crush over to hang out, your roommate would always be someone getting in the way of things, no? After all, it would be really easy for strange rumors to spread, so everyone was kinda on-guard and love never really had a chance to develop. However-”

With single-person rooms, boys and girls would feel less apprehensive about meeting up in secret.

“The change caused romantic developments to happen like, way more often.”

This appeared to be the reason why she was so surprised that I still didn’t have a girlfriend.

“Then let me ask you this: Are a lot of students in actual relationships right now?”

“Well, somehow that isn’t happening this year, like, at all.”

Oi. If that’s the case, isn’t it wrong for you to be judging me for being single?

I wanted to say this, but it wouldn’t make any difference to her, so I held back my words.

“Perhaps your theory is wrong?”

“No way!”

She denied it confidently.

“As a student, you just don’t understand how much you’ve been blessed with a perfect environment.”

I couldn’t tell if her actions were fueled by mere positive thinking or something else entirely.

“You’ll come to regret it someday, so wouldn’t it be better to fall in love now, while you still have the chance?”

What in the world was she trying to teach a student who should be focused on studying?

While I’m well aware that there are many different kinds of teachers, in a sense, she just might be the most unpredictable one out there.

“Say, may I ask you something?”

“Hm? Are you wondering if I would date a guy who’s younger than me? Sorry, a first-year high school student is a bit...”

“I never said anything like that.”

“I know. This is the point where you should be laughing.”

So this is where I’m supposed to be laughing? I was somehow getting swept up in her mysterious pace.

“So what is it? Ask me, ask me!”

Despite having just changed the subject, she immediately tried to bring it back.

“You support student relationships, but it’d be difficult for students from different classes to date each other, wouldn’t it?”

“How come?”

“Because the classes are at war with each other, it could end up causing problems.”

I gave her what I thought to be an obvious response, but then I noticed Hoshinomiya-sensei’s sparkling eyes.

“Then that’s, like, even better!”

“...Wha?”

“Normally, you would do your best for the sake of your own class, right? But here, your significant other would be from one of the rival classes. And that’ll give rise to stuff like anguish and conflict. Drama!”

As if deeply moved by her own words, she nodded to herself repeatedly.

“If you put complex drama together with these relationships, won’t the competition become even more exciting?”

“Well, I suppose that might be true.”

Honestly, she probably wasn’t wrong. Even if someone betrayed their own class in favor of their partner, it wouldn’t be all that surprising.

Plus, it’d be virtually impossible to figure everything out and manage it all.

“What’re you two talking about?”

“Hoh? Speak of the devil.”

Devil? Hoshinomiya-sensei’s choice of words was strange. The person she was referring to didn’t seem to understand either.

At this point, Hoshinomiya-sensei stopped our conversation and put some distance between us.

“We were just chatting, Sae-chan. Don’t look at me with such a scary expression, would you?”

“He’s my student.”

“You seem to care about Ayanokōji-kun quite a bit. Well, we’ll find out what he’s capable of soon enough thanks to this special exam. He’s going to be facing off against Sakayanagi-san, someone rumored to be the best in the school year.”

“Then there’s no need for you to force yourself to get involved.”

“Ah, that’s for sure. What a typical thing for you to say, Sae-chan.”

Teasing Chabashira, Hoshonimya-sensei smiled. From the looks of it, she hadn’t chosen to reach out to me for no reason. After Hoshinomiya-sensei left, Chabashira looked over at me with some sort of sidelong glance.

It seemed she really wanted to know what we had been talking about.

“Do you want to know what we talked about?”

Since we were still on the way to school, I spoke up to satisfy her curiosity.

Chabashira didn’t respond. She seemed to be waiting for me to continue talking.

“We were talking about room sharing.”

“Room sharing? ...Sounds like another load of crap.”

Apparently, Chabashira was also familiar with the room sharing situation Hoshinomiya-sensei had been talking about.

It was reasonable for me to assume that the company Hoshinomiya-sensei was talking about earlier was none other than this very school.

Except, it was originally two people per room instead of one.

Well, if I wanted, I could verify this assumption immediately, but I simply didn't care at all.

5

A TRAP, A HOME-COOKED MEAL, AND A FAVOR

Later that day, a somewhat unusual incident took place.

It happened at the start of the lunch break, just as the Ayanokōji Group was making their way to the cafe to eat together.

“Hey Ichinose. We should go get back at ‘em! Even the score!”

As we were walking, we heard a harsh voice from up ahead of us. This voice belonged to none other than Shibata, a first-year student in Class B. He was accompanied by two other students who were also from Class B, Ichinose and Kanzaki.

“It’s like, totally unusual, right guys? For Shibata-kun to get angry like that?”

“It’s certainly unexpected.”

It was understandable why Haruka and Akito were surprised.

“You think so?”

Airi, on the other hand, didn't quite seem to understand, since she usually never involves herself with people from the other classes.

Shibata was a member of the soccer club just like Hirata. He was a bright, energetic, and popular person, although a bit different from how Hirata usually was.

As far as I knew, he wasn't the type of person to raise his voice like this.

“But couldn't it just be a coincidence?”

Ichinose used a persuasive tone to try and calm Shibata from his rage.

However, Shibata seemed to believe he had solid evidence and immediately refuted her.

“I don't think so. You do know it's the third time today, right? They're definitely trying to pick a fight.”

Kanzaki noticed our presence and lightly motioned to Shibata. He looked at us with a somewhat embarrassed expression and calmed himself down, but it was already too late. An awkward silence filled the air.

“Heya, were you guys on your way to lunch?”

Just like that, Ichinose called out to us.

She wasn't asking just one of us, but rather addressing the group of us as a whole.

My friends hadn't interacted with Class B's leader very much, so they were at a loss as to how to respond.

Haruka nudged me in the side with her elbow, so I reluctantly decided to speak for the group.

"...Yeah. We're headed to the cafe. Did you need something?"

"Wow, what a coincidence. We were just headed there ourselves."

As she spoke, Ichinose happily clapped her hands. But then, I noticed something that seemed out of place. Normally, Ichinose would always make eye contact with the person she was talking to, but this time, she didn't meet my eyes at all.

"If you guys don't mind, would you like to join us for lunch?"

Taken aback at her unexpected invitation, we all exchanged confused glances with each other.

"Ichinose, what are you doing?"

Kanzaki hurriedly interjected, most likely because he wasn't expecting her to propose something like this.

“What am I doing...? We're not competing against Class C, so what's the problem?”

“That's true, it's just...”

Kanzaki didn't seem very open to the idea of all of us going together.

However, if Ichinose had already made up her mind about it, there was no way he could refuse.

We, on the other hand, were a bit stuck. Unsure of what we should do or how we should answer...

“Time is of the essence. Let's get going~!”

But with a smile like hers, none of us were able to refuse.

Part 1

We pushed together two tables in the corner of the cafe and sat down to have a meal together.

It was not only a group composed of both Class B and C, but a highly unusual group at that.

“Sorry for inviting you all so suddenly like this. It’s my treat, so don’t hold back!”

Ichinose spoke, presenting us with an apology.

“Are you really sure about that? Ichinose?”

Kanzaki’s reaction to her offer was somewhat excessive.

Just before the last special exam, Ichinose made a deal with Class D to prevent Ryūen’s expulsion by promising that Class B would cast their praise votes for him.

In order to save their classmate, Class B should’ve had to cough up every last private point they could get their hands on.

While I'm sure they had found some way to break even, they probably didn't have the luxury to be eating out like this, much less paying for others.

"We were already on our way to eat here anyway, so we'll pay for ourselves."

After I spoke, everyone else in the group nodded along in agreement.

"I kinda forced this on you, so you don't have to be so considerate..."

"It's fine. This way, we can eat what we want without feeling guilty about it."

Under the pretense of sharing a peaceful meal together as equals, I once again turned down Ichinose's offer.

"So... Why did you invite us?"

Keisei broached the subject, unable to hold himself back from asking about it.

"It's because y'all seemed kinda surprised with Shibata-kun's behavior earlier. I thought it'd be better if I was just upfront with you about it instead of letting you guys speculate too much."

In a sense, Ichinose's judgment may be correct. If she hadn't called out to us, we would've probably ended up talking about what we saw for a while. Asking ourselves why he had gotten so riled up. And depending on the situation, it was also possible that a third-party might inadvertently overhear us, causing rumors to spread.

Kanzaki, however, wasn't so sure.

"Are you sure you can tell them?"

"Do you really think this is something we need to keep quiet about?"

"We can't rule out the possibility that somebody in Class C is involved."

"Even if there is, it wouldn't make any difference, would it?"

"Ichinose is right, it just sounds like we were whining at this point."

As soon as Shibata cut in, Kanzaki glared at him with a sharp look in his eyes.

"W-what is it Kanzaki?"

"Nothing..."

Shibata didn't seem to understand Kanzaki's true intentions, but if I had to guess...

Kanzaki probably thought that Shibata's words weren't very appropriate, but nobody else seemed to catch onto this, so it wasn't a particularly big problem.

"In any case, now that they've already heard this much, wouldn't it be best to just tell them?"

"...I guess."

Shibata's careless remark had been the deciding factor, forcing Kanzaki to back down.

"Simply put, you could kinda say Class D has recently been harassing us a little bit."

"A little bit?"

Shibata cut in, his voice filled with conviction.

"For some reason, me, Nakanishi, and even Beppu have all had to deal with the same crap from them. I dunno what to tell you, they're pestering us constantly and following us around for no reason. My man Beppu was

pretty scared when Albert went and just silently cornered him up against a wall earlier.”

Just after Shibata finished, Kanzaki joined in on the complaining, probably deciding that it wouldn’t make much of a difference at this point now that most everything had been put out into the open.

“I’ve spoken to those two about it myself, and pretty much everything checks out.”

In other words, Class D had been targeting some of the students in Class B ever since the special exam started.

“It hasn’t gotten physical or anything, has it?”

“For now.”

For the time being, it didn’t appear that they’ve resorted to anything more than stalking and intimidation.

Of course, if Class D really became violent, the problem would get several times larger.

“It’s probably their way of putting pressure on us. We’re thinking they’re looking to wear us down by keeping this up until the exam starts.”

“Gimme a break. Class D is scary enough as it is. You do know that even Class C’s been swallowed up in the trouble they’ve caused, right?”

Shibata was probably referring to the time when Sudō fought with Ishizaki and Komiya earlier this year.

Keisei had been quietly listening to their exchange, but at this point, he spoke up himself.

“I know it’s kind of strange to get advice from another class, but I don’t think their behavior is all that surprising. Class D certainly has a bad image, but a certain amount of external pressure is understandable. In fact, we’ve been seeing signs that Class A might be spying on our class.”

“Is that true?”

With a nod, Keisei proceeded to tell them about the Class A students we had seen eavesdropping nearby our classroom.

“Class D is also kinda desperate, so maybe they’re looking to pick up any information they can get their hands on?”

Despite having only listened to Keisei’s explanation for a short time, Shibata appeared to be convinced by what he was saying.

Be that as it may, it certainly seemed like Class B would be the one to sustain the most damage.

“At the most basic level, this exam plays out in our favor, so it’s not unreasonable that they’d do something like that. We should probably expect them to continue their harassment right up until the limit of what the school rules allow them to.”

This was Kanzaki’s analysis of the situation. That said, the part he hadn’t considered was that Class D was only targeting a small fraction of Class B’s students.

Did they decide that it was too risky to challenge Ichinose or Kanzaki...?

Or did they have their sights set on something else entirely?

“I don’t really think this is the kind of thing Kaneda-kun would be behind. Maybe it’s Ishizaki-kun?”

“Yeah probably.”

“I know it’s concerning, but we just have to do what we can. We just have to continue working together, choose the right events, and do our very best on the day of the exam. Right?”

The two boys from Class B nodded along with Ichinose's hope-filled words.

“Are you saying you aren't gonna take any measures against Class D? Not even basic investigation?”

“Hmm, I don't think so. We're gonna focus our efforts on preparing for the ten events Class D come up with next week.”

In other words, no matter what Class D would throw at them, they were planning to rely on the strength of their own class to make it through.

They would come face-to-face with the truth, without being deceived by false information. It was a safe, reliable strategy.

“What can I say, Class B is really something else.”

Keisei spoke, his voice filled with wonder, before continuing.

“Wouldn't you normally do whatever it takes to beat a class that's above you? If stuff like spying and intimidation get results, it only makes sense that they'd make use of it. Honestly, your choice to take the high road and place your full confidence in your own capabilities is something that Class C would never be able to do.”

Even though on the surface it didn't seem we were taking action against Class A, many of us were racking our brains for some way to find out information about them.

“Who knows? Maybe we're just not clever enough to do stuff like that?”

Saying this, Ichinose let show a small smile, to which Keisei spoke up again.

“Well, I think I get what you wanted to say to us. If rumors began to spread because we carelessly talked about Shibata's outburst back there, it would just end up broadcasting to Class D that their strategy is working.”

Keisei had discovered the reason why Ichinose had invited us to eat lunch together.

If Class D were to find out that their harassment had done damage to Class B, it would only end up adding fuel to the fire.

In which case, Class B would have even more to deal with than they did now. They were looking to maintain their resolve and emphasize that Class D's tactics hadn't had any effect on them.

“Indeed. That's why I'd like to ask that you all do your best to keep this from spreading further.”

“Spreading it around wouldn’t do us any good, and it’s not like we want to make an enemy out of Class B either.”

Keisei agreed, with Haruka, Akito, and Airi nodding along shortly after without the slightest bit of hesitation.

“Thank you so much everyone. Really.”

As Ichinose thanked us, her eyes met mine for the first and only time.

At that moment, she casually brushed a strand of hair away from her face.

And then, as if carried on by the wind, a faint scent of citrus tickled my nose.

She quickly looked away, returning her gaze back to the group as a whole, and I found myself thinking that she was acting a little strange today.

Regardless, that wasn’t something I was going to point out right now.

Part 2

After lunch, we parted ways with Ichinose's group. Once they were out of earshot, Haruka finally said what's on her mind.

"Man, Ichinose-san sure is cute isn't she? That smile of hers at the end there was pretty much cheating. Dontcha think?"

"Me? Not really..."

"Ah, Yukimuu, your face is turning red just thinking about it."

"No it isn't."

"You don't have to deny it. Like, I'm a girl and even I think she's totally adorable, so I'm sure boys are completely floored with her."

Airi seemed to agree with her, as she was nodding along fervently as Haruka spoke.

"Miyatchi and Ayanokōji-kun think so too right?"

Since Akito and I didn't want to be targeted like Keisei, we both reluctantly forced a smile to avoid being questioned further. Oddly enough, Airi asked the next question.

“I may just be imagining things, but... has Ichinose-san ever used perfume before?”

“Ah, I’ve been wondering about that too. She was using some kind of citrusy perfume wasn’t she?”

“Yeah. That may have been what surprised me the most. Maybe she’s had a change of heart or something?”

“Huh, what do you three think?”

The two girls had begun talking about something that us boys couldn’t possibly know anything about, so Haruka’s question put us on the spot again.

“Was she wearing perfume? Either way, she might’ve just felt like wearing some today or something, right?”

Keisei’s uninterested response prompted Haruka to let out a blatantly disappointed sigh.

“Boys really don’t notice the small stuff, do they?”

“... Moving on... We’re not the only ones in a tough spot. From the looks of it, the other matchup has their own fair share of problems to get through.”

Not wanting to deal with any more of Haruka's teasing, Akito changed the subject.

“In order to win against Class B, Class D probably can't afford to care about appearances anymore. It's totally possible that Class D might get even more serious with their harassment moving forward.”

Taking the chance to escape, Keisei quickly got on board with Akito's new conversation topic. His prediction was probably right on the mark.

There were only three victims so far, but it wouldn't be surprising if that number went up a bit.

“Ryūen isn't taking the lead for them anymore, either. They probably don't stand much of a chance if they don't do something like this.”

“Even so, it seems to me like they're going about it the same way Ryūen-kun would.”

Akito was right. Applying pressure like this felt like a strategy Ryūen would employ.

“But it's pointless. It won't be enough to break through Class B's stronghold. After talking to them today, I'm starting to think it may be a

good thing that our opponent is Class A. I simply don't wanna go against Class B."

"Eh? Why do you think that Yukimuu?"

"Compared to everyone else, their unshakable unity and the way they tackle their problems head-on without overestimating their own abilities is just on another level. They'll produce consistent results no matter what event it is. I don't feel like we'd be able to win."

Keisei seemed to be afraid of the idea that Class B would perform above average at everything they put their minds to.

"But like, even if they're above average at everything, that doesn't mean anything if they lose, ya know?"

Even if they got eighty or ninety percent in all seven events, they'd still lose if their opponent gets a full score.

"Do you get what our chances are like when we don't know which events will get chosen on exam day? There might be some specialized events that the lower classes can win at, but at the same time, if those events don't get chosen, we'd face a crushing defeat. The results would be disastrous."

"I see... You might be right."

Airi seemed to understand Keisei's explanation, as she nodded her head several times in agreement.

“Hey, hey, Stop!”

As we walked around a hallway corner with Keisei in the lead, Haruka abruptly grabbed his arm and called him to a stop.

“Wha-”

Keisei tried to ask what was going on, but Haruka covered his mouth with her hand and pointed just in front of us.

She was pointing at Ike and Shinohara, who were walking together just a short bit ahead of us.

“S-say, Shinohara.”

“What?”

“Well... Uhhh.”

“Cat got your tongue? What is it?”

We all became silent and carefully listened to what we could hear of the conversation taking place before us.

“...A-are you free on Sunday... or, something?”

“Sunday? I don’t have anything planned at the moment, but... Wait, what?”

“I mean, uhm, wanna hang out a bit, or something? Only if you want to, that is.”

We could hear what they were talking about, albeit just barely. Haruka and Airi looked at each other with expressions that seemed to be filled with excitement, while Keisei and Akito, in stark contrast, shared a mutual expression of utter disbelief.

“White day is on Sunday, isn’t it? Do you think Shinohara-san gave Ike-kun chocolates on Valentine’s?”

“Maybe!”

Although Shinohara at first seemed skeptical about Ike’s invitation, she gradually seemed to pick up on what was happening.

“Well, it’s just, you gave me chocolate and all... So I thought I’d like, return the favour, ya know.”

“You’re so sincere even though it was just obligatory chocolate. Do you even have any money?”

“I’ve been saving up a bit... N-nevermind, it’s fine if you don’t want to.”

“...I never said I didn’t want to.”

“D-does that mean...”

“D-don’t get the wrong idea, kay? The special exam is coming up soon, so this is just my last chance to relax. And since you’re saying you’ll pay and everything, how could I say no?”

For some reason, seeing this reminded me of the conversation I had with Hoshinomiya-sensei this morning about room-sharing.

The small seeds of romance might be starting to bud in places I wasn’t even aware of.

“Let’s go.”

“Huh? Wait. We just got to the good part.”

“Don’t stick your neck into other people’s love affairs.”

Akito grabbed Haruka by the collar of her shirt and began walking away in the opposite direction.

“Come on, what’s wrong with listening for just a bit longer? My heart’s starting to flutter.”

“Mine’s not.”

“Ugh. What was I expecting from a clueless guy like you... right, Airi?”

“Y-yeah. My heart’s beating pretty fast too... But, they’d be embarrassed if they saw us, wouldn’t they?”

“That’s true, but like, it’s their fault for doing this in public in the first place.”

If they were to notice us in this situation, it very well might interfere with their slowly budding relationship.

Part 3

Class C was still at the point where we were gathering information about what events everyone specialized in.

The after-school discussions were becoming less and less frequent, but the classwide group chat was becoming more and more active as time went on. While Kōenji and Hirata still hadn't participated, anyone in the class could now join the conversation whenever they wanted to.

In fact, based on the activity in the group chat, this type of discussion just might be better for Class C as a whole compared to face-to-face discussions where people might not be brave enough to share their opinions. However, this was simply what someone could see from an outsider's perspective.

In reality, I was simply waiting for Horikita to finish everything I had entrusted her with.

Ironing out the details about the role I would play would come later.

Even so, there were still several things to be wary of. Namely, Kōenji and Hirata.

Hirata in particular. Horikita probably had no way of fixing him in his current state.

Since both of them still hadn't participated in the group chat, it was clear that neither of them were looking forward to the special exam.

While Kōenji's behavior was nothing new, Hirata's absence was a great loss for the class.

Hirata had changed drastically. It was as if he had become a different person entirely.

While it may be a harsh way to put it, he was no different than a swollen abscess at this point. A complete thorn in our side. Even though it was painful, nobody would dare touch it. The only thing we could do is pray that the swelling would go down on its own. It was truly a shame. If he went back to normal, he'd be a versatile card that could be played in any event.

Besides, there were still a few other things to be wary of as well.

“...Hirata-kun!”

As Hirata left to head home for the day, Mii-chan ran out after him.

I found myself wondering how many times this had happened already.

While one person after another had already given up, Mii-chan still hadn't lost heart.

Was this a testament to the power of love? No... even if it's love, the question still remains.

She was most likely still afraid that he would come to hate her for her incessant behavior.

So then, why does she keep trying to reach out to him?

“Like, it's super hard to see Hirata-kun act like this...”

Kei quietly spoke to her group of friends who were still in the classroom.

“Yeah. Is it really alright to leave him alone like this, Karuizawa-san?”

“It'll be useless no matter what I say. He might hold a grudge against me.”

Hirata's steadfast rejection from back when Kei reached out to him just the other day was still fresh in everyone's memory.

“Yeah. First he got dumped by Karuizawa-san, then Yamauchi-kun got expelled and...”

I cast a cursory glance toward the girls as they were having their discussion before leaving the classroom.

My sights weren't set on Hirata today. I was going to look into yet another problem that needed to be dealt with.

I had business with a particular student who had left the classroom shortly after Mii-chan.

“Hey, you got a minute?”

I called out to the girl, who turned and looked behind her after pausing for a moment.

“What is it, Ayanokōji-kun?”

The girl was none other than Kushida, someone who hadn't been very involved in the special exam so far.



She hadn't done or said anything to help our classmates, nor interfered with them.

Instead, the days had gone by without her saying very much.

In the past, Kushida would've taken on a more prominent role and worked to support the class.

However, there was no sign of her doing that this time, and there were probably two reasons behind that.

The first was that her position within the class had become unstable due to the outcome of the vote in the previous exam.

Although she was being used by Yamauchi, the fact that she had conspired with him to get me expelled had been exposed to everyone.

Even though many students had decided that there was room to sympathize with Kushida, it was still a slight problem for her.

The whole affair had left a stain on what she was most proud of: her guise of a good, virtuous person.

The second reason was that Horikita was the one taking the lead this time.

Looking at it from Kushida's point of view, this was probably the real reason behind her lack of action.

Kushida has hated Horikita from the beginning for knowing the secrets of her past.

On top of that, Horikita had given her quite the scolding just before the end of The Class Vote exam.

Whatever her reasons may have been, it was her punishment for trying to expel someone who didn't deserve to be expelled.

The damage to her pride should've been nearly fatal.

"You don't seem to be supporting Horikita this time."

While I was already fully aware of this, I daringly brought it up anyway.

After all, I wanted to find out what actions Kushida was planning to take in this special exam.

No matter how closely you look at her smiling, cheerful mask, you wouldn't be able to discern her true feelings.

If you didn't know about the real Kushida laying dormant beneath the mask, you wouldn't think anything was amiss.

“Shall we take a walk as we talk?”

“That’s fine.”

Not wanting our conversation to be carelessly overheard by others, she urged for us to walk somewhere else together.

“Do you have any plans after this?”

“Yup. I’m going to hang out with some girls from Class B for a bit. Do you think it’s wrong for me to be playing around during such an important time or something?”

“No, it’s important to take some time for yourself sometimes. I think pretty much everyone would agree with that.”

It’d be foolish to spend your time obsessing over the exam twenty-four hours a day.

When it’s time to be serious, you should be serious. But when it’s time to relax, you should relax.

“You understand it, don’t you? The reason why I’m not doing anything? I thought it’d be fine to support Yamauchi-kun and get you expelled. But now that everyone knows what I’ve done, what kind of right do I have to lead the class?”

Kushida intentionally left out the fact that Horikita had become the leader, the real reason behind her lack of action.

“You don’t look very convinced.”

“Well, I guess.”

“Just to be clear, the reason I’m not lending a hand isn’t because Horikita-san is the one leading the class, okay?”

“Really?”

“Really really.”

She nodded several times for emphasis, but even so, she was still lying about it.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

Of course I didn’t believe her. But even though my suspicions didn’t show on my face, she was bound to think so either way.

She had already decided that I’d be suspicious of her a long time ago.

“How do I look to you right now, Ayanokōji-kun? Be honest with me.”

“Well...”

Outwardly, she seemed like a classmate with a lovely smile on her face.

However...

I tried to imagine Kushida's true personality hidden underneath her mask.

"I'm definitely gonna fuck up that bitch! She dared to make a fool of me in front of the entire class? I'll never forgive her! I'll kill her! Kill her kill her kill her! I'll definitely kill her!!"

With a vein popping out of the side of her head, she ranted about Horikita, prattling off a list of profanities that were unbearable to listen to.



“...”

I couldn't find the words to express what I had just imagined.

“You just thought something incredibly rude, didn't you?”

“No... Not at all.”

The image I had imagined had been a bit too extreme, so I was just at a slight loss for words.

I pushed it out of my mind and decided to cut to the chase.

“Since you said you won't get involved this time, I plan to respect your decision.”

“But in return, you want information about the class... Don't you?”

Kushida had a good understanding of the meaning behind this special exam.

“Correct.”

“Isn't there someone else in the class you can rely on now, Ayanokōji-kun?”

Despite her constantly smiling face, she wasn't going to agree to cooperate with me immediately.

Even though we had a contractual relationship, Kushida was once again beginning to put up her guard.

We seemed to be approaching the final turning point that would determine whether I would be an enemy, or an ally.

“Nobody can compare to you.”

“I'm happy to hear you say that, but I've got all sorts of things on my plate right now.”

“All sorts of things?”

“You're so mean, Ayanokōji-kun.”

The fact that her reputation had been stained had been a huge drawback for her.

The image of the character she had built up over the past year had been distorted.

There's no doubt that she still had a lot of support from her classmates, but they didn't seem to be completely honest about that. It was a perfect example of how it's hard to gain trust, but only takes a moment to lose it.

“Then let me try asking you the opposite. How can I get you to cooperate with me?”

“I suppose you'll have to give up on that this time. I plan on laying low until I can be myself and have peace of mind in class. Does that bother you?”

In other words, this meant that she wouldn't cooperate with me, but she wouldn't get in the way either.

However, this also implied that she would only perform at the bare minimum if she were to be selected for an event.

“Is it fine to do that? Not just for me, but Horikita as well?”

“Yeah. You could interpret it that way. Because recently, I've come to realize that this school is much more comfortable for me than I thought.”

The way she presented me with a favorable option seemed to be another one of her skills.

For the time being, she would don her mask of lies and continue her performance.

It was unfortunate that I hadn't been able to get her to cooperate, but it was probably better to just accept it for now.

"I understand. I'm sorry for asking something unreasonable."

"Not at all. Honestly, I'm really happy you wanted to rely on me."

Once we reached the school entryway, I decided to part ways with her.

Kushida left, walking toward the Keyaki Mall without stopping to look back even once.

Part 4

The weekend came and went, and just like that, it was Sunday, March 14th. White Day had arrived.

To be honest, I was grateful it had come on a Sunday.

There were several gifts prepared on my desk.

If today had been a weekday, I'd have had a hard time figuring out when to hand them over.

Should it be in the morning, before class? Or should I wait until after school?

There would be a lot of other things to think about too. What order would I hand them out in? How would I handle the gifts for people in other classes?

More than anything, it wouldn't be good for my reputation if people around me saw what I was doing.

I knew that if it came down to it, it would be best to hand them over without worrying about how other people saw me, but that would be impossible.

However, with today being a day off, I could just put them in their respective mailboxes.

In order to make sure I didn't run into anyone, I left my room early in the morning and made my way to the dormitory mailboxes.

“Let's see...”

I placed a gift in the mailboxes of each student who had given me Valentine's Day chocolates.

I was about to head back to my room after finishing with the last gift when I came across Ichinose.

She reacted as if she had seen something she shouldn't have.

“G-good morning, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Ah... Yeah, good morning.”

Even though it was still before seven, I had come across a pretty unexpected encounter.

And just like in our last meeting, Ichinose still seemed to avoid making eye contact with me.

“I happened to wake up a bit early today, so I just got back from a morning walk.”

It seemed like she was looking at me as she spoke, but she was really staring at something just behind me.

She was probably looking to check her mail before heading back to her room.

“Oh... uhm, pardon me.”

I moved out of the way so she could check her mailbox, and she thanked me with a slight nod. Of course, once she looked inside... the gift I had given her was naturally the first thing to come out.

“I’m sure you already know, but that’s, you know, my return gift for Valentine’s.”

Holding the box in her hands, Ichinose stood unmoving, as if she had frozen over for a moment.

“A gift like this... You, like, you didn’t have to...”

Ichinose responded, having only just come to her senses.

“No, it’s only right.”

“...T-thank you. Uhm, I’m sorry. I’m not used to this kind of thing, so I’m kinda nervous.”

I felt the same way. I hadn’t wanted to run into anyone in this situation, so I was pretty uncertain myself.

Since things were getting a bit awkward, I opted to change the subject.

“...Come to think of it, has anything new happened with that problem we talked about last Thursday?”

“Ah, eh, that, you’re still worried about that?”

“A little.”

Ichinose seemed to have an easier time talking with the subject changed, as the awkward atmosphere quickly subsided.

“I went and questioned everyone immediately after we parted ways, but the only victims were the three people Shibata-kun had told us about. But...”

“But?”

“On Friday, it was like the number of victims tripled all of a sudden. Yesterday I got reports saying that three more boys and three more girls were being followed around or harassed just like the others.”

In other words, a total of nine people had been affected by Class D's harassment. However, in the first three days after the exam started, they had only focused on three. But on Friday, all of a sudden, that number had increased by six.

“Do you have any idea which students have been doing the stalking?”

Ichinose nodded and began to list off their names.

“As far as I know, there was Ishizaki-kun, Komiya-kun, Yamada-kun, Kondō-kun, Ibuki-san, and Kishita-san.”

Six people in total.

They were all people who were willing to get their hands dirty, at least to a certain extent.

They didn't seem to have any intention of hiding their identities, given that she had managed to identify each of them already.

“I wonder if the six of them plan on following whoever they end up crossing paths with?”

It was a natural question to ask since most of Class D was made up of average, ordinary students.

“I’ll be investigating further on Monday.”

“What are you going to do if the problem is bigger than you thought?”

There was a possibility that even Ichinose and Kanzaki would be affected at some point.

“Hmm. Well, I’m not sure there’s anything we can do, you know? It’s not like they’ve been violent or anything... so we’ve decided to just put up with it until they cause some real damage. We’ll just do our best to provide the victims with emotional support.”

From the looks of it, they were ready to take action at a moment’s notice, but only if Class D actually got physical.

“I see.”

Class D was behaving strangely.

I couldn’t help but wonder if they were really going to go after every student in Class B.

With only six people doing the harassment, they weren’t exactly exerting very much pressure.

Even if they continue to do this over and over again, it wouldn't amount to anything more than just simple harassment.

It was possible that Ishizaki didn't think that far ahead when he thought of the strategy.

Or perhaps they'd be satisfied as long as they could do a bit of psychological damage?

“Am I doing something wrong?”

Having noticed that I was lost in thought, Ichinose looked up at me with a slightly uneasy expression.

“No... What you're doing now should be fine. In fact, Class D wouldn't get punished even if you made a complaint to the school. Plus, if you went and complained to them directly you'd be doing exactly what they want you to do.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right.”

However, it was important for her to make sure that Class D's objective really was what she thought it was. That being said, it doesn't look like Ichinose was interested in taking action, so it'd be unnecessary for me to say this to her.

With her policy that primarily focuses on non-aggressive defense, it'd be out of line for me to say anything more.

“Have you decided on the ten events you'll be submitting?”

“Yup. We had a solid grasp of everyone's strengths and weaknesses from pretty early on. We finalized everything yesterday after mixing in some events that we think Class D might not be good at. How about you, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“I haven't been involved in any of it this time. I'm leaving everything to Horikita.”

“But what are you going to do about your duties as the commander?”

“I've left that to her as well.”

Ichinose showed a look of surprise. She didn't seem to think I'd take the role so casually.

“It sounds like you've got a lot of faith in Horikita-san. Or... Maybe you're saying you think you can handle everything, no matter what events or rules she ends up choosing?”

“It’s definitely the former. Unlike you, I’m only close to a few of my classmates, so I honestly don’t know anything about them. I only became the commander to prevent anyone from being expelled.”

“But then, why did you want to go up against Class A?”

“That was also Horikita’s idea. Maybe she thought it would give us the best chances of winning or something.”

“I see.”

Ichinose didn’t investigate any further.

Having reached the end of the conversation, the two of us stood waiting for the elevator.

“Ah... I totally didn’t prepare for this...”

Ichinose spoke as if she had just remembered something. I looked at her as she stood beside me, continuously twirling a strand of her hair with her index finger.

“Prepare?”

“N-no, it’s nothing you need to worry about.”

Not long afterward, the two of us boarded the elevator, which promptly arrived on the fourth floor, where my room was located.

“See you later, then.”

As I stepped out of the elevator, I turned around and locked eyes with Ichinose for a brief moment, catching her off guard.

“W-wha-!! Uh, I, uh... S-see you!”

In a sudden panic, Ichinose began to mash the close button several times over, and after a moment, she disappeared from view as the elevator doors closed between us. While it was a strange way to part ways with someone, it was nice that I had managed to make it through this troublesome White Day ordeal.

“Come to think of it, she didn’t smell like citrus today.”

Although, it was early in the morning on the weekend, so there was no particular reason for her to go out while wearing perfume.

Part 5

Monday morning soon came around, the day that our opponent's ten events would be announced.

What events and rules had Class A come up with, and how exactly would the commander be involved?

On my way to the school, I happened to run into Horikita's older brother and Tachibana.

It didn't seem like they had been waiting for me. Rather, it really appeared to be just a coincidence.

Tachibana discreetly distanced herself without saying anything in particular.

Perhaps this was her way of being considerate so she wouldn't get in the way of the impending conversation.

There was no doubt that her tendency to make quick, thoughtful reactions like this had been an ongoing source of support for the elder Horikita back when they were on the student council.

"Is the special exam going well?"

There was something special about Horikita's older brother. Even though he hadn't gotten an in-depth explanation, he already had a firm grasp of my situation.

"That's supposed to be my line. Are you sure you can graduate as a member of Class A?"

"Well, that'll probably depend on next week's results."

Whether he was worried or perfectly fine, there was no way to tell exactly how he was feeling by the look on his face.

"On my end of things, your sister has been working hard. Apparently, you've had more of an influence on her than I would've thought."

"Is that so?"

Currently, Horikita was practically bursting with energy, as if she had been touched by magic.

She had taken the initiative to bring the class together in Hirata's absence.

Recently, she had also been spending her time refining the class's strategy for each and every single one of the ten events.

"Shouldn't the third-years already be on break at this point?"

“Well, I was also surprised to find out that wasn’t the case back when I first enrolled here. After all, third-year students at most other high schools would already be on break at this time of year. Of course, we’re just as focused as any other third-year student would be when it comes to stuff like moving on to higher education or finding a job. You just wouldn’t be aware of that yet.”

It sounded like the third-years had a variety of troublesome things to deal with right now.

“Higher Education? Finding a job? Even though it hasn’t been decided if you’ll be graduating as a member of Class A yet?”

“You’ll understand eventually.”

The elder Horikita left it at that, without even trying to give me a detailed explanation.

I guess there are some things he just can’t say to the first and second-year students.

At the end of the day, figuring out whether or not you can rise up to Class A would have to wait until you reached your third year.

“If you have any questions, feel free to ask. I’ll tell you anything as long as it’s within the scope of what I’m allowed to say.”

“That scope seems rather narrow in my eyes.”

At my unexpected response, the corners of his mouth raised into a smile, albeit only slightly.

“Maybe so. You can think of it as an obligation I have as a former student council president.”

This probably meant he had to be careful when answering questions about the school as a whole.

“Well, this is a good opportunity. There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

I decided to make use of this casual encounter and ask the elder Horikita a question.

“It’s about Horikita... that is, your little sister. I think she’s an excellent person. In both a physical and academic sense, she doesn’t fall short in the slightest. I don’t know if I’d say she’s topping the charts, but she had the talent to place second or third from the first day she stepped foot in this school. While she may not be on the same level as you, a former student

council president, I don't think she's bad enough for you to denounce her and try to drive her out of the school entirely."

And then, there was the strangest part of all.

"Either way, you and your sister are two years apart, that is, you haven't seen her last two years' worth of growth. With the system this school has in place, you shouldn't have been able to tell at first glance just how much she's grown up."

After all, as he was now, the elder Horikita hadn't been able to meet with her since she began her second year of middle school, not even once.

Even if he had been disappointed with her results on the entry exam, that shouldn't have been enough to make him this disappointed in her.

Back then, when I saw them meet outside the dorm, Manabu's attitude toward his sister was anything but calm.

"I see. Certainly, having seen what you did back then, it's only natural you'd be curious about this."

At that, I was reminded of the first time I came into contact with the elder Horikita.

“I wasn’t disappointed with Suzune because of something superficial like her grades or the class she was placed in. It had to do with maturity.”

“Maturity?”

“Suzune has changed dramatically from the way she used to be. She was the type of child who would always have a smile on her face.”

She, that girl, used to smile all the time?

...No, I honestly couldn’t imagine that at all.

“In other words, you’re saying this calm, collected personality she puts forward is because of your influence?”

“She has been trying to imitate me for a long time now. It’s a bad habit that started to rear its head ever since the upper grades of elementary school. But thinking back on it now, it’s my mistake for letting it happen for so long. I tried for many years to get her to improve by treating her cold and indifferently, but it actually ended up having the opposite effect on her, backfiring entirely.”

As a result, Horikita continued to chase after her brother’s shadow and became the kind of person she is today.

“So even though you seem to be completely perfect, you’ve failed to communicate properly with your sister?”

“There is no such thing as a perfect human. Am I wrong?”

“Fair enough.”

I couldn’t possibly refute him on that.

“In short, after reuniting with her once again, all it took was a single conversation for you to reach your conclusion?”

Although, back then, it didn’t exactly seem like they had been talking to each other for very long.

“I realized it before I even talked to her. From the first moment I saw her again, I knew that in the past two years, she hadn’t changed at all.”

As I wondered if he had seen something in her only an older brother could understand, he continued to explain.

“That girl has always been completely hung up on my every word. Study harder, exercise more, don’t do one thing, don’t do something else. It would’ve been fine if that was as far as it went. But, she’d imitate my favorite foods and beverages, even going as far as my copying my favorite

colors and the type of clothes I'd wear. She's shown just how strongly she's depended on me every step of the way."

The fact that she had gone that far was already a little alarming.

However, if you look at Horikita's behavior since she first came to this school, it made sense.

"So, after reuniting with your sister at this school, you felt like this dependency problem still hadn't changed?"

Unless he could read minds, there just wasn't enough information to tell what she had been through in the past two years.

"That's right. Anyone who knows what she was like as a child would be able to tell. That girl..."

He cut off mid-sentence, choking up on his words.

"...Nevermind. This is probably something I should keep secret, even from you. I'd like it to be the perfect metric to determine whether or not Suzune has really changed."

"I guess that means your sister still hasn't changed yet."

The elder Horikita nodded. While Horikita had shown a great deal of progress compared to how she was at the start of the year, according to her older brother, that didn't seem to be enough.

“She’s been trying her best to break away from her past, but she’s only halfway there.”

I found myself wondering if she’d be able to satisfy her brother’s so-called ‘perfect metric’ before he graduates.

There weren’t very many days left until the graduation ceremony.

“But, if...”

The elder Horikita stopped walking for a moment and fixed his eyes on me.

For some reason, I found myself getting caught up in his powerful gaze and stopped walking as well.

“If Suzune could stop chasing after my shadow, break away from her dependency, and become honest with herself...”

A Spring breeze blew through the air.

“She would surpass me altogether, and probably become someone you wouldn’t be able to ignore.”

He wasn't saying this just because he was doting on her as an older brother. He truly meant it.

In a lot of ways, I also admired Horikita's high potential.

Why was that, though? Was it because of what he just said?

Suddenly, a thought crossed my mind. What was I supposed to be doing here, at this school?

No, what did I want to be doing? I felt like I had suddenly found the answer to that question.

"But in the end, it all depends on whether she can make the change at all."

"She will change."

I responded to him confidently.

"Or, no, let me rephrase that."

But then, I chose to correct myself.

"I'm going to make her change. Not in the same way I've gone about it so far, but for real this time."

"...Oh? I never thought you'd say such a thing."

It felt like this chance encounter with the elder Horikita would leave a large impact on my life.

It would be a very long time before I knew whether that premonition proved to be true or not.

“Say, can I ask you one more thing before you graduate? It’s a completely personal question.”

I didn’t know if I’d ever have another chance to talk to him after this.

“What?”

“Are you going out with Tachibana?”

I was well aware that it was a silly question, but I asked anyway.

Despite having moved on from the student council, the two of them were still often off doing things together.

“No. Nothing of the sort.”

A flat denial. It didn’t seem like he was trying to hide anything either.

However, a quick glance at Tachibana’s face told me it was somewhat more complicated than that.

At the very least, there was no doubt that Tachibana had some sort of feelings for him.

“I’ve spent these last three years thinking about nothing but school, for better or for worse.”

“Is that so?”

“But I didn’t think something like this would come out of your mouth. Could it be that you’re just a regular high school student?”

Perhaps I had been influenced by that talk I had with Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“I think I’m about as regular as you can get.”

“Ah. That’s right. So, have you gotten yourself a girlfriend, Mr. Regular High School Student?”

Even though I had been the one to bring up the topic, I hadn’t expected him to turn it back on me.

“Not at all right now. But if someone suitable comes along, I’m accepting applications.”

“I feel like I could rest assured if I left Suzune to you, but I get the sense that that isn’t going to happen.”

“Of course not.”

There was no way that would happen.

“T-that’s no good. You do know saying something like that can become a flag, right?”

Tachibana suddenly interrupted the conversation she had been attentively listening to for a while now.

“Flag?”

When the elder Horikita questioned her word choice, Tachibana hurriedly provided an explanation.

“No, uh, I guess it’s like, situational irony or something...? Y’know, the type of thing that happens from time to time where two people who never thought they’d get together end up going out? It’s a common scenario.”

The elder Horikita and I looked at each other, neither of us having understood Tachibana’s explanation very well.

“N-no, nevermind.”

Tachibana seemed to think she wouldn’t be able to get us to understand what she was trying to say, as she ended the conversation with that.

Part 6

Back within the classroom, our morning homeroom had come to an end.

And, at the same time, the ten events Class A had chosen were announced.

Horikita read through all of the documents that had been left behind for us.

Mentally, I summarized everything, putting it all together based on the number of people required for each event.

『Chess』 Required Participants: 1 ▪ Initial Time Allotted Per Person: 1 Hour (Running out of time will result in a loss)

Rules: Standard chess rules apply. However, your allotted time will not increase before each move, even after the 40th turn.

Commander Intervention: At any given time, the commander may give instructions to the participating player for a maximum of 30 minutes. Any time spent giving instructions will also use the corresponding participant's allotted time.

『Flash Mental Arithmetic』 Required Participants: 2 ▪ Time: 30 Minutes

Rules: Victory will be decided by the student who takes first place in terms of both speed and accuracy using abacus-style mental arithmetic.

Commander Intervention: The commander can change the answer to a single question of their choice.

『Go』 Required Participants: 3 ▪ Time: 1 Hour (Running out of time will result in a loss)

Rules: Three one-on-one games will be played simultaneously. Standard Go rules apply.

Commander Intervention: At any given time, the commander is allowed to advise a move.

『Modern Literature Test』 Required Participants: 4 ▪ Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: The test will be within the scope of the first-year literature curriculum. Victory will be decided based on the class with the higher overall score.

Commander Intervention: The commander can answer a single question on behalf of the participant.

『Social Studies Test』 Required Participants: 5 ▪ Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: The test will be within the scope of the first-year geography, history, and civics curriculum. Victory will be decided based on the class with the higher overall score.

Commander Intervention: The commander can answer a single question on behalf of the participant.

『Volleyball』 Required Participants: 6 ▪ Time Restriction: First to 10 Points, Best of 3 Sets

Rules: Standard volleyball rules apply.

Commander Intervention: At any given time, the commander is allowed to perform 3 substitutions.

『Math Test』 Required Participants: 7 ▪ Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: The test will be within the scope of the first-year math curriculum. Victory will be decided based on the class with the higher overall score.

Commander Intervention: The commander can answer a single question on behalf of the participant.

『English Test』 Required Participants: 8 ▪ Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: The test will be within the scope of the first-year English curriculum.
Victory will be decided based on the class with the higher overall score.

Commander Intervention: The commander can answer a single question on behalf of the participant.

『Long Rope Jumping』 Required Participants: 20 ▪ Time: 30 Minutes

Rules: The class with the higher number of successful jumps wins.

Commander Intervention: The commander may change the order of the opposing team's lineup in any way they want one single time.

『Dodgeball』 Required Participants: 18 ▪ Time Restriction: 10 Minutes
Per Set Over 2 Sets

Rules: Standard dodgeball rules apply. In the event of a tie, a sudden death round will commence.

Commander Intervention: At any given time, the commander can return one disqualified player to the court.

“It's unexpected that they've chosen multiple sporting events. I thought they'd double down on events that require you to use your head like written exams. Although, there's a good chance they're just meant as distractions.”

That was Horikita's first impression, and Keisei, speaking up right after her, shared similar thoughts as well.

“Chess and Go are both major, widely-known games, but it feels like they're putting us in a tough spot because only a few students have ever actually played them. Team coordination plays a large part in all of the sports they chose, too.”

There shouldn't be anyone in our class who has never heard of chess or go, but most students probably hadn't actually played or even touched them before.

“Overall, I wasn't expecting them to keep commander intervention to a minimum in most of the events. Especially when it comes to academic events, where the interventions they've come up with would hardly affect the outcome.”

“I guess it just goes to show how much they trust their own classmates. Class A has a significant advantage in academic events, and not only did they choose four academic tests, but the number of people required for them is pretty dang high. This is looking really difficult...”

In every test so far, Class A had always gotten the highest average score out of all of the classes.

That was probably why they had chosen to use such a large number of participants in their testing events.

These tests were essentially their way of forcing us to have a purely academic competition since the commander wouldn't be able to do very much.

The fact that they hadn't solely chosen written exams was also a good decision on their part.

If they had thrown in seven or eight written exams, we would've been able to focus our efforts on studying for them.

They were probably trying to limit the options we had available while forcing us to study subjects that wouldn't be relevant later.

“Volleyball requires 6 people, 9 if you include the substitutes, dodgeball requires 18, and long rope jumping requires the most at 20. They require such a large number of people that, if even one of them end up getting chosen, there'll be a high possibility that we'll be required to participate more than once.”

Since there was no way to tell which of the ten events would be used on the day of the exam, we wouldn't be able to cut corners with any of them.

Furthermore, since many of their athletic events call for a large number of people, we'd have to spend a huge amount of time and effort on participant selection and practice. If we were bold enough to reserve a place like the school gymnasium to practice, Class A would probably end up catching wind of it. In other words, we had to conceal our activities and practice in secret.

However, there was no way for us to tell which events would be used on the day of the exam. If we spend a lot of time practicing for one event, our efforts would be short-lived if it doesn't end up getting chosen. That is, we would be wasting our time. On the other hand, if we decide that an event is just a distraction and choose not to practice for it, our lack of preparation would be painfully obvious if the event really does end up getting chosen. We had hardly any chance of winning.

It would be important for us to keep an eye on Class A's movements for the next week, but it's easier said than done. It wouldn't be easy to find them if they're practicing early in the morning or late at night. They could also split up and practice in smaller groups.

We couldn't overlook any of the events. No matter which ones end up getting picked, they were all troublesome.

Of course, we weren't lucky enough to be faced with events that we actually wanted to participate in.

“Does anyone have any particular experience with chess or go?”

Horikita prompted the class for a show of hands, to which only Miyamoto responded.

“I've played Go a few times with my family, but I'm not good enough to be familiar with the rules.”

There was no doubt that, as a starting point, these two events made the situation look rather bleak.

Although it was a bit late, I also raised my hand.

“I can play chess, more or less, but I don't understand Go at all. I've never even touched it before.”

Despite being the commander, I figured that I should let everyone know I could play the game. Later on, I could teach other people.

“I guess it's a relief that we have at least somebody with experience. But again, it's truly a challenging exam, so we can't make light of these events whether we like it or not.”

I wonder just how much someone could increase their proficiency in chess or Go in less than a week. In the worst-case scenario, only two of our events would make it through, while the other five would be from Class A.

For at least part of the exam, we had no choice but to rely on the baseline potential of our classmates.

However, why...?

“What’s wrong, Ayanokōji-kun?”

Horikita looked at me with a curious look on her face.

“...No, it’s nothing.”

For the chess event, the commander involvement was simply far too impactful. It was almost like a battle between the commanders.

It gave me the impression that Sakayanagi wanted to use the event to compete against me.

“Hey, Horikita. Shouldn’t we also start seriously collecting intel at this point?”

Feeling a sense of urgency, Keisei prompted Horikita for an answer.

“Are you saying you want us to find out which of the ten events Class A plan on choosing in the end...?”

“Yeah. Honestly, it’ll be pretty tough for us to prepare for all ten of these events in the time we have left. If we don’t somehow get our hands on information, our chance of winning will be a lot smaller.”

“But Class A prolly won’t give out information very easily.”

One of the boys responded, saying something that everyone was already well aware of.

“Even so, we still have to try.”

“I understand your concerns, but I can’t make a decision on that just yet. Let me get a grasp of how much experience we have with each of these events first.”

Horikita pushed aside the topic of intelligence gathering and began focusing her attention on understanding the class’s position with respect to all ten of Class A’s events.

Part 7

“Horikita, can you spare a moment?”

During the break between classes, Keisei reached out to Horikita.

“No problem. What is it?”

“Talking here is a little bit... well, it’s about the special exam.”

Not wanting anyone else to hear their conversation, Keisei subtly urged Horikita to follow him out into the hallway.

I had intended on seeing them off from my seat, but Horikita turned and looked at me.

“Is it alright if Ayanokōji-kun comes along too?”

“...Alright then.”

He didn’t exactly seem welcome to the idea, but he agreed to it nonetheless.

It wasn’t like I was going to refuse, so I followed the both of them out to the hallway.

“Have you thought about what I said?”

“About intel gathering?”

“Yeah.”

“About that... I don't think it'll be easy to get our hands on any information from Class A.”

“But, wouldn't it be too much of a waste to do nothing? We should use our time more effectively.”

Apparently, Keisei wanted to take action and gather information as soon as possible.

The desire to do as much as you physically can in order to win was a feeling I knew very well.

“Do you think just sticking around the students in Class A will solve the problem?”

“Let's see. It's doubtful that the average Class A student would know which five events will be chosen as well.”

Sakayanagi was probably the only one who knew which events would be chosen, and if not, it would be limited to her and those closest to her.

Considering the type of person she is, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for her to thoroughly manage the flow of information.

“Even if Sakayanagi is the only one who knows about which events they'll choose, her classmates are bound to have a vague idea what the plan is, right? Wouldn't you say so, Kiyotaka?”

“Well, her classmates should probably at least know something.”

Having spent the last year together, they would know each other's strengths and weaknesses to a certain extent.

They'd probably be able to make an educated guess about which ones would be chosen all on their own.

“Exactly. That's why I've come up with a method of getting our hands on information from Class A.”

“That method being?”

“Bring Katsuragi over to our side.”

Katsuragi. A former leading figure within Class A that had opposed Sakayanagi.

Keisei first made sure there was no one around, then dropped his voice to a whisper.

“Recently, Katsuragi’s biggest supporter Totsuka got expelled due to Sakayanagi, so he probably still bears a grudge, right? I’ve run into him a couple of times in the last few days, and it’s clear he’s not the same as he was before.”

There was no doubt that he held a grudge against Sakayanagi.

I thought back to the conversation that had taken place on the day of Yahiko’s expulsion, when Katsuragi and Ryūen met up with each other.

“Do you really think he’d betray his class just to spite Sakayanagi-san?”

“Of course, we’d need to offer him something appropriate in return.”

Apparently, Keisei already had an idea about that as well.

“If he’s able to help our class win, we’d end up netting at least 130 class points overall. From the perspective of the class as a whole, that adds up to more than 6 million private points over the course of a full year. Furthermore, if we were to put some aside every month, it wouldn’t be impossible for us to save up close to 20 million points.”

Having heard this much, I could already guess where Keisei was going with this.

“Then, when we manage to climb up to Class A, we’ll offer Katsuragi the opportunity to transfer classes. How about that for a bargaining chip? Plus, this way, we’d establish a good relationship with Katsuragi.”

“First of all, an ordinary student wouldn’t agree to these terms. No matter what we tell him, we’re just Class C. You do know that, right?”

“But, are you sure you can say that given the situation he’s in right now?”

“It’s true that Katsuragi isn’t in the best place right now, but if word got out that he betrayed his class, he’d be the next one on the chopping block. He wouldn’t have the luxury to wait for us to save up 20 million points. Even if we assume that our class points will get higher and higher, and even if the entire class agreed to cooperate, it would probably still take at least half a year for us to get that many.”

Put more realistically, it would take a full year of saving for us to get to that point.

Besides, even though we’d be gaining more class points, 20 million private points were by no means a small price to pay.

“So what do you think, Horikita?”

“...Well. It’s as you say, Yukimura-kun. Getting our hands on information is immensely important.”

“Then-”

“However, I don’t agree with your suggestion in the slightest.”

“W-why not?”

“While Katsuragi-kun has undoubtedly been pushed into a corner, I don’t think he’d be willing to agree to our terms and betray his class. Our offer isn’t nearly good enough.”

It’d be a different story if we had the points on hand now, but it would be strange for him to accept an offer that would only pay out more than a year later.

“But if we don’t do anything, we won’t get any info at all.”

“I don’t think we’d get any useful information in the first place, even if we did do something.”

“How would we know if we don’t try?”

Despite Keisei's persistence, Horikita was clearly unwilling to agree to his idea.

"I'm not entirely opposed to gathering information, but your method just isn't good enough. We can discuss this again if you come up with any new ideas."

With that, Horikita ended the conversation and returned to the classroom.

"Damn it!"

Keisei kicked the hallway wall out of frustration.

"...Hey Kiyotaka, will you help?"

"With persuading Horikita?"

"No... With persuading Katsuragi on our own."

His words really emphasized his determination.

"I'm not saying that Horikita has given up on winning, but it seems to me that, somewhere in the back of her mind she thinks we don't stand a chance. If not, she should be willing to take the chance and give it a try, right? Even if word got out that we met with Katsuragi, it wouldn't put Class C at a disadvantage at all."

Even if I were to disagree with Keisei in this situation, I probably wouldn't be able to stop him from moving on his own.

That being the case, I might as well go with him and get a better grasp of the situation.

“How are we going to get in contact with Katsuragi?”

“That... is something I'll have to think about. We still have some time before the exam.”

“Alright. Let me know when you decide.”

I responded to him positively to prevent him from taking action on his own and decided to cooperate with him for the time being.

Part 8

[Hey. Do you have time to talk for a second?]

It was about 6 PM, just before dinner. I had been watching my stove heat up a kettle of water when I received a call from Horikita. As she spoke, the water just began to boil, the sound of the kettle whistling as it did.

[Are you making dinner?]

“No, don’t worry about it.”

The water had only just started to boil, so I hadn’t done anything special yet.

“What’s up? What did you want to talk about?”

If she was looking to ask me for my help with sorting out the events, I would have to refuse.

[Don’t worry, this isn’t about getting your help with the events. I promise.]

Horikita immediately saw through what I was thinking.

[Though, well. If it’s alright with you, can we talk in person? The conversation shouldn’t take more than an hour.]

Was it something hard to explain over the phone? Or maybe she was looking to confirm something by meeting face-to-face?

An hour wasn't an unreasonable amount of time. It would be difficult to turn her down.

“Alright. Will you be coming here?”

[While that's fine with me, you've been getting involved in all sorts of things recently. How about you come over here instead?]

She seemed to be wary of any unexpected visitors that might come to visit me.

I had also been to Horikita's room before, so there wasn't any particular reason for me to refuse.

After turning off the stove, I went straight out of my room with my cell phone in hand. Then, I got on the elevator and headed toward Horikita's room. While the sun had already set, it was still early in the evening, so it shouldn't be that strange for a boy to be walking around on the upper floors of the dormitory where the girls resided.

Part 9

Not long after ringing the doorbell, I could hear the sound of the lock being turned from inside the room.

I had thought she would greet me with her usual serious expression, but I was surprised instead.

“Welcome.”

I was invited inside by Horikita, who was in an unexpectedly good mood.

I, on the other hand, felt slightly anxious upon seeing this abnormal change in her demeanor.

There was a faint scent of miso in the air coming from further inside.

“I was just preparing dinner. Come on in.”

If that’s the case, it would’ve been fine if she had waited until after dinner to call me over.

I felt Horikita’s pressing gaze as I stood there, hesitating to enter, so I quickly resigned myself.

She might have been reluctant to have someone come over if it had gotten much later.

I decided to stop overthinking it and stepped inside. Almost immediately, I noticed something strange.

For some reason, the small table had clearly been set for two people rather than one.

Was she planning on having dinner with someone else after she finished talking with me?

“Say...”

Just as I was about to ask, Horikita interrupted me.

“Feel free to take a seat.”

No, asking me to sit...? There were clearly a pair of chopsticks placed in front of the seat she had motioned to.

My instincts were telling me that I was being set up in a trap.

“So, what exactly did you want to talk about?”

Instead of sitting down, I quickly tried to get on with the conversation.

“Do you plan to stand around as we talk? I still have some preparations to do, so could you please take a seat and wait for me to finish up?”

“No... I just feel like standing.”

“You what? I don’t feel comfortable having you stand there like that. Sit.”

Upon hearing Horikita’s voice become increasingly harsh, I decided to sit down.

It had been a surprisingly long time since I had seen this level of confidence in her, mixed together with a pushy, unreasonable attitude.

I had forgotten about it because we had recently begun to distance ourselves from one another.

For the time being, would I just have to sit and wait patiently?

At a glance, the food only seemed to be halfway done. It would probably still be quite a while before she finished with it.

“Hey. It’ll only take an hour, right?”

“Yes. Our conversation in and of itself shouldn’t take more than an hour.”

Horikita spoke with her back turned to me, her words giving me the natural impression that I had fallen for her trap.

Indeed, over the phone she had said that the conversation would be over in an hour.

That is to say, other things weren't included in that estimation.

“How long with everything else included?”

“Hm... Then maybe an hour and a half to two hours or so?”

I knew it.

“Since it's already this late, I figured I may as well treat you to dinner too.”

Not a single person could've seen this coming. It felt like I was at the mercy of her unreasonable word games.

Even so, I could see that she had already begun cooking. At this point, it would be rude to refuse the meal and head back to my dorm. She really had skillfully lured me into coming here.

Although she had her back to me, I could see that Horikita's cooking skills weren't half bad.

Rather, given that she was just a first-year high school student, her skills seemed remarkably presentable.

“Both of my parents work full-time, so I was in charge of cooking dinner most of the time.”

Horikita spoke quietly, as if she knew exactly what I had been thinking and the meaning behind my gaze.

“You don’t find it too troublesome or time-consuming?”

While cooking can be fun, there were certainly many troublesome parts of the process.

“After I found out my brother went to this school, I took it upon myself to practice cooking more often.”

“Were you preparing yourself to enroll at this school and live life on your own?”

“That’s correct.”

I could hear Horikita put down the knife she had been using and set about putting the finishing touches on the pot of miso soup.

Even so, I found myself wondering what we were going to be talking about if we weren't going to be discussing the special exam.

I still didn't have the slightest idea.

Part 10

After waiting for another fifteen minutes...

Horikita had finished cooking and set everything out on the table. Seeing all of the food spread out before me was better than I had expected it to be. The way the meal decorated the dining table was similar to how you would see on TV from time to time. She then wrapped everything up by sitting down across from me.

If Sudō were to see the two of us like this, he'd probably throw a punch at me in rage.

Even if I were to tell him that it was a misunderstanding, it still probably wouldn't get me anywhere.

Better yet, I wanted to believe that he had already experienced this kind of treatment.

No, he would probably still be jealous of me either way.

“Eat.”

At Horikita’s insistence, I picked up my chopsticks. The two of us sat facing one another with the food placed in between.

The scene gave off a strong sense of déjà vu.

It reminded me of the time Horikita had taken advantage of me by buying me a meal in the cafeteria at the beginning of the school year.

“Are you suspecting something? Of me?”

“Not at all, I’m just feeling a bit uncomfortable.”

“If you start doubting the kindness of others, it just serves as proof that you have a problem as a human being.”

“You of all people are telling me that?”

“Today is special, you know.”

“...”

If she really did make this because she was being considerate, then I suppose it’d be rude not to at least try it.

However, it's within human nature to be suspicious. No, rather, for me it was my past experiences with her that caused me to doubt her. This time, however, she had managed to perfectly back me into a corner.

The outcome had already been decided from the moment I had carelessly stepped into Horikita's room.

For the time being, I chose to at least try the soup.

The smell of miso tickled my nose. She had used healthy ingredients with daikon radish as the base.

“Barley miso, huh?”

Upon taking my first sip, the characteristically intense, sweet flavor of the soup spread throughout my mouth.

“You're well informed. It's the preferred form of Miso soup in Kyushu, but I wasn't sure if it'd suit your taste.”

“You're a good cook.”

I tried to give her a genuine compliment, but she didn't seem particularly happy about it.

“In this day and age, cooking doesn’t require any special skills, so it’s not anything worth boasting about. If there’s something you want to make, you just have to look up a recipe online and buy what you need from the supermarket or a convenience store. You do know that, right?”

If it’s nothing more than cooking, then that might be right. That being said, all sorts of little touches could help highlight your culinary skills, from the way you arrange the dish on the plate to the way you prepare the ingredients. It wasn’t just something you could learn overnight.

“Have you been treating Sudō to meals like this too?”

When I asked her this, she stared at me with a somewhat dissatisfied look in her eyes.

“Why would I be cooking food for him?”

“Well... you’re always helping him study, right?”

“Yes, but, while that may be true, how does that have anything to do with me cooking for him?”

It was just supposed to be a trivial question, but Horikita continued to object to it.

“If our positions were reversed and he was the one helping me study, then I’d be more inclined to agree with you. After all, this is normally done as a way of saying thank you. But, there’s no way that I’d go through all this trouble when I’m the one doing him a favor.”

Her reasoning was so solid that I couldn’t find the words to refute her, but...

“I can’t tell if you’re smart or stupid.”

That should be my line. Sudō had fallen for Horikita, so I had thought she’d already cooked for him. Apparently, she still hadn’t confronted his feelings for her yet. But, that was probably because she doesn’t place very much emphasis on something like love. She hasn’t grown to the point where she can be aware of stuff like that yet.

“Well now. If you don’t mind, how about we get down to business?”

Saying that, she took out a notebook and offered it to me.

Without even having to ask what it was, I knew this had to be what she had been working on over the last several days.

“I’ve come up with a plan that I think will suit our class the best. I’d like to hear your opinion on it.”

And then, she added on a few more words.

“You ate my food, didn’t you?”

What a truly dirty trick. She treats me to a meal and then comes and asks me to do work for her. I immediately grabbed the notebook and started flipping through it. She had thoroughly documented the various aspects of the special exam. There was even an entry about the ten events Class A had chosen, but since those had only just been revealed today, she was still in the process of writing them.

Incidentally, the ten events Class C had chosen were English, Basketball, Archery, Swimming, Tennis, Table Tennis, Typing, Soccer, Piano, and Rock Paper Scissors.

That last one had probably been thrown in as a last-ditch effort in case things weren’t looking good for us.

She had also written her evaluation of who would be the best at each event along with an estimated success rate.

This notebook contained everything we needed for the upcoming exam. I read over it quietly until I had gone through all the details. Upon seeing me like this, Horikita seemed surprised.

“Dinner aside, you didn’t think I’d read through this so seriously, did you?”

“Ah, yeah. I was even prepared for you to turn me down, but...”

“The data you’ve analyzed is crucial for this special exam. I wouldn’t be able to do my job as the commander properly without at least taking a look at it.”

Compared to the information I had gathered on my own, there weren’t any notable differences.

“This collection of data almost feels like it exposes our entire class.”

“It’s the culmination of everything I’ve done over the course of this past week. It’d be troublesome if it wasn’t accurate.”

It probably wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that just about anybody could be a proper commander if they had their hands on this notebook.

“I’m going to continue adding on to it, and eventually include information on our best choices for all of Class A’s events as well. I was thinking that you could make use of it to put up a fight as the commander.”

“Yeah. People like Sudō and Akito should be valuable assets for the class, even outside of one-on-one events. Whereas in Onodera’s case, her chances

are less certain if she were to compete against a boy. It would probably be wise to have a third or fourth option in mind ahead of time.”

Horikita nodded silently. It’d be a waste to make a hasty decision on how somebody would be participating when they have the potential to shine across a variety of events. In any case, I really couldn’t find an issue with what she had created.

“I don’t have any problems with the notebook. But, could I just add on one thing?”

“What is it?”

“One of the events Class A chose was chess, right?”

After drinking a sip of water, I turned our conversation in a new direction.

Because nobody in our class was particularly good at chess, the section on it in the notebook was understandably still blank.

“Yes. I haven’t put very much thought into it yet since I’ve personally never played the game myself. Out of everyone, the only person who even has a grasp of the rules is you, the commander. We’re probably going to have to follow your guidance about it.”

“About that, I’d like you to be the one to take part in it.”

“...Me? I get that we’ll need to have somebody practice for it, but... Why me? I wouldn’t be good at it at all and probably won’t be able to win.”

“Because I think you’re the most suitable person for me to teach.”

“So you’re saying it’d be easier for you to teach me because you wouldn’t have to interact with someone new?”

“I’d be lying if I said that wasn’t a part of it.”

“I can do it, but... there should be at least a few students who’d be willing to listen to you, right? And besides, I don’t mean to sound like I’m bragging or anything, but I think I’m a pretty good option for some of the other events too.”

Horikita was one of the more well-rounded students in the class.

Whether it be a written exam or a sporting event, I had no doubt that her results would be well above average.

“Chess requires raw talent. There’s a time limit imposed on how much the commander can intervene. It doesn’t matter how confident Sakayanagi is at chess, it just isn’t enough time. I can’t imagine that she’ll make use of it at the beginning of the match. In which case, the key to winning would be playing the early stages of the game properly.”

If Horikita were to be overwhelmed at the beginning, it'd be extremely difficult for me to make a comeback.

“Your fascination with the chess event isn't just because you know the rules, is it? You've predicted that Class A is going to choose it as one of their five events, haven't you?”

“I'm almost certain of it. Don't you think it's strange how chess is the only event where the commander has so much influence?”

“That's true. I felt like something was up with that as well... Alright. I'll follow your discretion.”

Thankful that she readily agreed to my request, I went back to eating my meal.

“So, how will we be practicing chess?”

“It probably won't be the easiest for you, but I was thinking we'd practice late at night over the internet.”

“That's fair, we wouldn't attract any unnecessary attention by doing it that way. Nothing would be leaked either.”

Another advantage was that, by doing it this way, it wouldn't interfere with practicing for any of the other events.

Part 11

I had hoped that the discussion would end with this, but things seldom turn out the way you want them to.

“I have a favor to ask of you, Ayanokōji-kun. You did eat my food, after all.”

“Don’t you think it’s cowardly to pull the same trick over and over again?”

We were around halfway through our meal when the devil reared her head a second time.

It seemed that she had more in store for me than just the notebook from earlier.

“Cowardly? Given the way you go about doing things, shouldn’t I be the one saying that?”

“What are you talking about?”

“During The Class Vote exam the other day. You were the one who lured me into taking action behind the scenes, weren’t you? Answer me.”

“Wait. I didn’t-”

“Back then, my older brother may have been the one who helped guide me, but you were the one who was really behind it.”

It didn't seem like she was just making a random guess.

That being said, it was also unlikely that the elder Horikita had leaked the information.

"I didn't notice it at first, but I connected the dots after thinking it over carefully."

In other words, she had managed to reach this conclusion on her own.

"You predicted how I would act every step of the way."

"Even if I denied it, I don't think you'd believe me."

"That's right. Of course, I don't have any conclusive evidence. Even if I asked my brother, he wouldn't say anything that'd even hint at your involvement anyway. But at this point, I'm almost certain of it."

Little by little, Horikita had matured over the course of this past year.

That was a fact that her brother and I could both agree on.

However, Horikita's talent had only truly begun to present itself once the discord with her brother softened.

Given that her big brother has known her for much longer than I have, he must've been well aware of just how high Horikita's potential really is. Chances are that's exactly why he's so dissatisfied with her always trying to follow in his footsteps.

“You look awfully uncomfortable.”

“That’s because it feels like I’m in the middle of being interrogated.”

“Just forget it then. Your attitude makes it clear that I won’t be getting anything out of you.”

With that, she cut the conversation short. It seems that it’s going to be harder to manipulate Horikita from behind the scenes from now on.

“I’ve got one more thing to ask you, but feel free not to answer.”

The powerful look in her eyes seemed to draw me in, unwilling to let me get away.

“Do you think we can win against Sakayanagi-san?”

“I don’t think it’s impossible. That’s the impression I get after seeing these notes of yours.”

“...Very well. I’ll do my best to get the class to the place it needs to be.”

“You’ve been doing great so far.”

In Hirata’s absence, almost all of our classmates have been following Horikita’s instructions.

She was fully prepared to take leadership of the class and pave the way to victory.

Honestly, I wanted to thank her for taking the initiative and doing the things I wasn't capable of doing myself.

"I'll leave the rest to you as well. I'm fully prepared to follow your judgement."

"I understand. But still, wouldn't it be better for you to make the decisions on rules for the commander?"

"You can take care of that too."

"...Are you really saying that you're going to fight with just the information I've prepared for you?"

"I don't really know all that much about our class anyway."

"Good grief... If you think you can beat Class A with that, you're just being naive."

"Maybe."

The two of us walked to the front door and I stepped out of her room.

“For the time being, I’ll thank you for today’s meal, but… please don’t use a method like this next time.”

I could already imagine myself being suspicious every time somebody offers me a meal from now on.

“Alright, I’ll come up with something else.”

No, that’s not what I meant.

Part 12

A few days before our confrontation with Class A, Keisei finally managed to get in touch with Katsuragi.

Shortly afterward, Keisei contacted me and called me out to a discreet location.

At this point, Katsuragi was basically isolated from the rest of his class and was often left all alone, so it was probably easy to get in touch with him.

“...So, what can I do for you, Yukimura?”

The man who harbors an unrelenting resentment for Sakayanagi stared at Keisei with a pointed look in his eyes.

“Katsuragi, there’s something I’m hoping you can help us with.”

“Given the current circumstances, I can already guess what you’re here to talk to me about.”

From the looks of it, Katsuragi already had an idea of what Keisei was trying to propose.

“Then that makes things simple for us. I was hoping you’d tell us which events Class A plans on choosing. Also, if possible, I’d like you to throw your matches for us.”

Keisei added in another request that he hadn’t mentioned to Horikita and me.

“And what would I get in return for doing that?”

“We’ll welcome you into our class.”

“That’s an amusing proposal. You want me to betray Class A and drop down to Class C?”

Katsuragi sneered at Keisei’s suggestion.

“We will rise up to Class A someday. We have the potential.”

Keisei spoke up once again, emphasizing that he could transfer classes once we managed to reach Class A.

But, to Katsuragi, Keisei’s words probably sounded like nothing more than delusional nonsense.

“You’ll rise up to Class A someday? Doesn’t every other class say the same thing?”

“That’s...”

“If you really have the potential, can’t you just beat Class A without doing something underhanded like this? Isn’t the reason why you’re trying to use me because you can’t do that?”

Keisei fell silent at Katsuragi’s irrefutable, scornful tone.

“Well, whatever. Let’s say you guys really can rise up to Class A. Are you saying you can provide me with 20 million points right now in exchange for the information? No, because that’s impossible, isn’t it? If you had that much, you probably would’ve used it to prevent Yamauchi from being expelled.”

Of course, Katsuragi was well aware that we didn’t have such a large amount of points.

“That’s...”

“Don’t tell me you want me to wait two years for you to prepare the points?”

“...Well, yeah.”

“This is beyond delusional. Even if you guys do become Class A, there’s no guarantee that you’ll be able to save up 20 million points by then. We could sign a contract, but it’d be useless if you don’t have enough points when the time arrives. No, is this even an offer everyone in Class C agreed on in the first place?”

Katsuragi wasn’t an idiot. He probably had a solid understanding of Class C’s current situation.

If this was an offer that everyone in Class C had agreed upon, the person who came to meet him would’ve probably been Horikita. Since Keisei and I were the ones reaching out to him, it must’ve been obvious that this was still confidential.

“I can understand that you’re desperate, but you didn’t even come prepared to negotiate. Were you planning to tell the rest of your class after I agreed to cooperate? Did you really think I would accept something like that?”

Betraying your fellow classmates wasn’t something that could be done easily.

Even more so for a man with a strong sense of duty like Katsuragi.

“...Are you, are you really fine with being silenced by Sakayanagi then?”

“What?”

“Do you really still want to cling to Class A even though they got Totsuka expelled?”

Catching onto the fact that Katsuragi wasn’t going to be persuaded by his offer, Keisei pushed forward, fully resolved to go down swinging.

“I wouldn’t have the confidence to make it to graduation like that. It’d be far too pitiful.”

“So you’ve resorted to inciting my emotions now? I’ll give you zero points for a strategy like that, Yukimura.”

“Dammit!”

Seeing as I was present right alongside Yukimura, Katsuragi then directed his attention to me.

“Do you have anything to say, Ayanokōji?”

“No, you’re completely right. There’s nothing left to say.”

Upon seeing me raise the white flag of surrender, Katsuragi redirected his focus to Keisei once again.

“Yukimura, I’m not trying to criticize you for anything, but if you want me to double-cross my class, it’s pointless if you’re not prepared.”

With his back up against the wall, Katsuragi stared out into the distance.



Rather than looking at something, it was more like he wasn't looking at anything at all.

“That being said, you were right about one thing.”

“...One thing?”

Despite the fact that Keisei had already given up, his ears perked up at Katsuragi's words.

“I do harbor an immense, unwavering hatred for Sakayanagi. For me, that's more than enough of a reason to do something, even if you don't have anything to give me in return.”

With his arms crossed before him, Katsuragi once again fixed his gaze on Keisei.

“As you might have already guessed, Sakayanagi hasn't told anybody which events she plans on choosing.”

As expected, Sakayanagi appeared to be keeping her plans to herself.

“And I'm not happy about it either. In an exam like this, where the entire class needs to cooperate as a unit, that's just not how she should be doing things. Typically, you'd expect her to share information with her peers and adopt a strategy that would secure our victory.”

By not sharing which events you'd be choosing, the biggest advantage would be that your choices wouldn't leak out to the opposing class. However, the quality of your training for the events would diminish at the same time. If you tried to prepare for all ten events, it's only natural that your overall efficiency would drop.

“If you’re fine with it, it’s not like I can’t tell you what I think she’ll end up picking.”

“R-really!?”

Just as Keisei was about to completely give up on persuading Katsuragi, he unexpectedly found himself catching a lucky break.

Katsuragi’s resentment for Sakayanagi ran deep.

“As long as you can promise me that everything I say stays between us...”

“O-of course. I’ll even bring up the twenty million points with Horikita and the rest of my class for you later.”

Keisei nodded along, apparently under the impression that he had managed to strike a deal with Katsuragi.

“That won’t be necessary. Even if the information I give you turns out to be useful, it probably won’t be worth twenty million points.”

“Then, what do you want in return?”

“Nothing. I just ask that you defeat Sakayanagi.”

With that, Katsuragi began to speak.

“Of the ten events, the three I’m most certain she’ll end up choosing are Chess, the English Test, and the Mathematics Test. After those would probably be the Modern Literature Test and Flash Mental Arithmetic. Conversely, events that require a large number of participants like dodgeball and long rope jumping can be pretty much thought of as fakes. Our class doesn’t seem to have practiced for them, as far as I can tell.”

We wouldn't be able to confirm if Katsuragi's predictions were correct or not until the day of the exam itself.

But, if we go into it thinking that he was right about the first three, it probably wouldn't end up biting us in the end.

“Are you really okay with it? With not getting anything in return?”

“Like I said earlier. Even if you don't have anything to give me, I still have more than enough reason to take action.”

Through an unexpected turn of events, Keisei had gotten his hands on information that he hadn't thought he'd be able to get.

Most likely, he was beginning to feel overwhelmed with joy.

“W-we did it Kiyotaka! Now we finally have a chance to win this!”

Keisei excitedly took on a triumphant pose.

“One more thing. You said that you wanted me to throw my matches for you as well, right?”

“Eh? Ah, no. You don't have to...”

“Hah... You came all this way to negotiate, and yet you're satisfied with just getting some information?”

Katsuragi let out a slight chuckle, seeming to have found Keisei's panicked reaction amusing.

“It's not like that, it's just...”

“Don’t go thinking you can win against Sakayanagi just because I’ve given you a little information. It would probably be wise for you to think that you’d just barely be able to put up a fight if I throw my matches. However, the only event I’d be able to help you guys with is Flash Mental Arithmetic, or, if it somehow manages to get chosen, Long Rope Jumping.”

After listening to Katsuragi speak, I decided to ask him a single question.

“Will you even be allowed to participate with Sakayanagi being so wary of you? It’s true that, if Long Rope Jumping gets chosen as an event, you might have to participate more than once. But, given that only one or two people can influence the outcome of the Flash Mental Arithmetic event, what makes you think she’d choose you for it?”

“That’s because the only students in Class A who specialize in Flash Mental Arithmetic are me and one other student named Tamiya. Furthermore, Tamiya isn’t all that skilled at it either. With that being the case, leaving me out of the event would just hurt our chances of winning.”

After all, Sakayanagi probably thinks that she’s dulled my fangs by having Yahiko expelled. In order to turn me into one of her pawns, she’ll get me to participate in an event.”

The idea of using Katsuragi, a force that had defied her, as a mere pawn was probably somewhat appealing to Sakayanagi.

Afterward, Katsuragi shared his plan to help us. If he were to be chosen for Flash Mental Arithmetic, he would deliberately get an answer wrong and, in the case of Long Rope Jumping, he would get caught on the rope early on in the event.

“That being said, I’d like to avoid having Sakayanagi realize that I’m throwing the events as much as possible. For Long Rope Jumping, I can make it look like I mess up by accident, but for Flash Mental Arithmetic, I won’t be able to make mistakes on the easier questions.”

It would look like we were competing on equal footing, but our class would win by a slim margin.

“Though, remember this. Even if Flash Mental Arithmetic gets chosen on exam day, if Sakayanagi doesn’t decide to have me compete, you’ll just have to cut your losses and give up on our plan.”

Either way, we had been provided with some unprecedented information, so we had no reason to be dissatisfied.

After Katsuragi left, Keisei began talking with excitement filling his voice.

“Let’s tell Horikita about this, as soon as possible.”

“No... We shouldn’t tell her we contacted Katsuragi yet.”

“W-why not?”

“This only ended up working out for us in hindsight. She won’t be happy with us if she finds out that we did this without telling her.”

“But, shouldn’t we be putting the information to use somehow?”

“I’ll find the right time to tell her. I’ll make sure we don’t get in trouble.”

Keisei seemed a little worried at first, but he eventually agreed.

It was probably because he felt guilty about meeting with Katsuragi in secret.

6

A MAN'S TEARS

Katsuragi had blessed us with crucial information, but that didn't mean that Class C had taken the upper hand.

Horikita was well aware of this, as she was trying to alleviate everyone's anxiety, one step at a time.

“Wait a moment, Hirata-kun.”

After school had ended, Horikita called out to Hirata, just as he was about to head home for the day.

It was the first time she had spoken to him since the Class Vote Exam ended.

Hirata simply stopped in his tracks without looking back to face her.

“I know you probably don't want to talk to me, but just allow me to confirm something. You don't need to practice for any of the events our class chooses, and I'm not planning on having you do anything on exam day either. However, that might change depending on the situation. Sakayanagi-san is aware of your condition, so it's possible that she might throw in several events that require a large number of people.”

No matter how much Class C might try to accommodate for Hirata, it's possible that every single student might have to participate.

“If that happens, what will you do? Apathetically hold all of us back? Or are you just going to do the bare minimum required of you? Can you at least answer me that?”

However, Hirata didn’t respond. A heavy silence filled the classroom; a silence that was only broken by the sound of Hirata’s footsteps as he walked away.

“So he won’t even give me an answer?”

Fed up with Hirata, Horikita simply averted her gaze as if she had given up.

“...Hey, maybe... Maybe we won’t win after all... With Hirata-kun acting like this and everything.”

I could hear anxious whispers coming from some of the girls.

And the boys were probably just as worried. After all, the man who had been leading the class was now gone.

Time and time again, his absence was proving to be a threatening burden on the class as a whole.

Horikita spoke up to me.

“You told me that fixing his problem was a collective effort. But in the end, he still hasn’t changed at all.”

“I wonder about that.”

“What...?”

Horikita looked up at me with a confused expression, but my attention was focused on something else entirely.

“Hirata-kun! Wait!”

At this point, I didn’t know how many times I had heard Mii-chan yell out like that. She hurriedly grabbed her bag and followed him out of the classroom.

“Mii-chan still hasn’t given up.”

“Why she hasn’t is completely beyond me.”

“Just focus on what you need to be doing, Horikita. Bringing Class C together and improving our chances of winning.”

Horikita was currently the only person in the class capable of doing that.

I left the classroom myself, following after Mii-chan.

I found the two of them standing face to face with each other on the way to the dormitories. However, the scene of them together gave a different impression than that of a bittersweet confession.

This was more of an attack. She was on the offensive to get Hirata back on his feet.

“Please, Hirata-kun. Everyone needs your help... So—”

“Mii-chan, just stop. Can’t you just leave me alone already...?”

Hirata cut her off with a grumbling complaint, almost as if he was wondering how many times he would have to tell her this for her to understand.

Without a doubt, these sharp words of his had come like a knife cutting deep into her heart.

However, the determination within her eyes didn’t waver one bit.

No matter how many times he pushed her away, Mii-chan wouldn't give up.

"I-I won't leave you alone... Not when you're like this Hirata-kun, I just can't!"

"Then, what will it take for you to back down? Tell me."

"That, uhm, if you go back to the way you used to be..."

"Go back? Impossible."

Once again, Hirata's coldhearted response mercilessly cut into Mii-chan.

"No it's not! I... I have faith that you can still go back to the way you used to be!"

"And I already told you it's impossible. This faith of yours is misguided."

"Even so, I still believe in you!"

Hirata clenched his fist. It gave the impression that, depending on the situation, he might start getting violent.

"Then, bring back Yamauchi-kun."

"Eh...?"

"That's how you can make things go back to how they used to be."

Now that Yamauchi had been expelled, he would probably never come back to Class C.

And, in the same way, Hirata would also never go back to how he used to be.

This was the reality that Hirata was looking to convey to Mii-chan.

"That's..."

“I hope you remember this before you try talking to me again.”

Hirata turned his back on her and began to walk away, but Mii-chan couldn't help but reach out to him as he left.

She grabbed onto his right arm, desperate to prevent him from leaving.

After all, if she were to let him retreat to his dorm, she wouldn't be able to do anything more to convince him today.

“Let go of me.”

“I-I won't!”

Despite Hirata's rejection, Mii-chan continued to hold her ground.

She believed that, as long as she didn't give up, her feelings would somehow reach through to him.

I maintained my distance from the two of them, watching the situation unfold from nearby.

I didn't want to get in Mii-chan's way by getting too close to them.

However, Hirata sighed openly.

And then, he raised his arm up in the air and forcefully swung it down to shake free from her grasp.

“Kya!”

For Hirata, it was a crude, uncharacteristic way of handling the situation.

The forceful, sudden movement, caused Mii-chan to collapse on the spot.

“...Stop bothering me already. If you don’t, I... I’ll...”

Mii-chan looked up at Hirata from the ground below him.

The anger held within Hirata’s gaze hurt Mii-chan’s feelings all over again.

“I have nothing left to lose. If you continue following me around like this...”

Nothing Hirata had said so far could possibly be compared to the crushing blow this would leave on Mii-chan.

However, just then, a lone man walked past me.

A man whose blond, flowing hair fluttered in the wind, sprinkled with the scent of cologne.

“My my. It seems you’re dawdling today as well, hmm? That’s quite an unsightly look on your face.”

Kōenji provoked Hirata with light, frivolous words.

As a member of the Going Home Club, Kōenji’s appearance here wasn’t all that surprising either.

“Oh, don’t mind me. Just continue with what you were doing a second ago. I’m only here to watch.”

Hirata was by no means stupid enough to continue after being told something like that.

Instead, he began to direct his hostility at the man who had interrupted him.

“You... Is there something you want from me...?”

“Something I want? I don’t ‘want’ anything. After all, I already have everything.”

With that, Kōenji began walking past Hirata and Mii-chan, however...

“Though, if there is something you could do for me...”

To Kōenji, this was just something he had come across on his way home for the day.

That’s all it was. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Hirata’s feelings were completely inconsequential to him.

“You’re an eyesore, so could you try and make sure you stay out of my sight? If this isn’t your ideal school anymore, why don’t you just show yourself the door?”

It was just his style to say something like this. He was suggesting that Hirata simply leave the school instead of continuing to fumble around like this.

“...Shut up. You don’t even understand my situation...”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. However, I can make a guess. You won’t make the choice to leave simply because it’ll cause problems for your classmates. Isn’t that right? What nonsense.”

“P-please stop, Kōenji-kun! Hirata-kun didn’t do anything wrong!”

Back on her feet, Mii-chan spoke up, eager to stop Kōenji’s relentless badmouthing of Hirata.

“Oops. It seems you aren’t happy with what I’ve said. I do apologize.”

Despite the smile on his face, Kōenji still treated Mii-chan with a certain amount of respect.

“However, the sooner you forget about Hirata-boy, the better. He’s beyond broken.”

Having been pushed to his limit for a while now, Hirata locked eyes with Kōenji and began to shorten the distance with him.

“D-don’t, Hirata-kun!”

Mii-chan sensed the obvious change in Hirata’s energy and stepped in between the two to stop him, only to be shoved aside by Hirata with even more force than before. Then, without so much as a glance at Mii-chan, Hirata reached out at Kōenji with an extended arm.

He tried to grab Kōenji by the collar of his shirt, but Kōenji quickly seized him by the wrist with his left hand and suppressed his movements.

“Kuh!”

“I don’t show mercy to those who come at me, okay? I don’t want my beautiful face getting scarred.”

An expression mixed with both pain and rage took shape on Hirata’s face, perhaps due to the strength of Kōenji’s grip on his wrist.

“You’re, you’re so irritating Kōenji...!”

“You’re free to do whatever you want, but I see no reason to take orders from somebody who made a girl cry.”

Kōenji let go of Hirata's wrist and glanced over at Mii-chan, who was once again back down on the ground.

“You're the one who knocked her over, so shouldn't you be the one to help her back up?”

“...That's not my problem anymore.”

“Not your problem, hm? Well aren't you rather merciless.”

Mii-chan averted her gaze from Hirata, unable to look directly at him anymore.

“That's fine then. You're free to decide what you want, Hirata boy.”

“Eh, wha, what!?”

Kōenji gallantly swooped Mii-chan up from the ground.

“Since you aren't going to, I suppose I'll do the honors myself.”

This was a man who was, by nature, difficult to make sense of, but this sudden, unexpected action left both Mii-chan and Hirata at a loss for words.



“Your heart has been broken, and moreover, you’ve even been injured. How about I help treat you?”

“W-w-w-wha!? I, uhm, I!? I’m not hurt anywhere!!!”

“Well, there’s no need to worry. Despite my appearance, I’m exceedingly gentle.”

This is just a guess, but when Kōenji said he’d help treat her, he was probably referring to something more of spiritual nature instead of a physical injury.

Something like her broken heart. I think. Probably.

Kōenji began to distance himself from Hirata, as if he were trying to separate Mii-chan from him.

“Uhm, uh, please put me down!”

“Hahaha! That won’t do. You’re already mine to take after all!”

“Eeeech!?”

Like that, Hirata glared at Kōenji’s back.

Kōenji stopped in his tracks, almost as if he had sensed Hirata’s harsh gaze.

“Do you still have complaints for me?”

In all honesty, I wish Kōenji would’ve just ignored Hirata at this point.

“You’re never gonna stop tormenting me, huh? Until the very end?”

“No. You’re the one tormenting the people around you. At least, I wouldn’t be ignoring a girl who shows kindness to me.”

Kōenji began walking away once again, with a blatant disregard for Mii-chan's protesting.

When Hirata noticed that Kōenji was headed toward the dormitory, he set off in another direction. It was as if he didn't want to be near the two of them anymore.

For a moment, I wasn't sure who I wanted to follow, but ultimately decided to follow after Kōenji first.

Furthermore, Mii-chan's bag had been left behind on the ground, so I picked it up and set off after them.

Once they approached the dorm entrance, Kōenji tenderly put Mii-chan back down.

“K-Kouenji-kun, why...?”

“Fufufu. Why indeed, hmm?”

Instead of answering Mii-chan's question, Kōenji let show a smile.

“Anyway, you should give up on chasing after Hirata-boy today.”

I handed Mii-chan her bag.

“Thank you, Ayanokōji-kun... Wait, where did you come from?”

I would've told her that she hadn't noticed me because I'm good at erasing my presence, but I chose not to say anything.

“I will be right here watching you until you get on the elevator, okaaaay?”

“...A-alright.”

Even if she went to look for Hirata after this, she doesn't know where he went.

Mii-chan gave up for now and got on the elevator in order to get away from Kōenji.

I stood there and watched as Kōenji took a seat on the sofa in the lobby.

“Now... What can I do for you, Ayanokōji-boy?”

“Why did you start talking to Hirata back there? Were you just adding fuel to the fire? Or did you take action thinking it’d help the class?”

“It seems you still don’t understand me, hmmm? Tsk tsk tsk.”

As he spoke, he lifted his hand up and lightly shook his finger at me.

“I would never do something for the class’s sake or anything like that. After all, I only do what I want to do. Even if my actions have a negative or positive impact on the class... Well, that’d be nothing more than a mere byproduct.”

So it’s just a byproduct, is it? As a rule of thumb, Kōenji only does what he wants to do. The sole exception to this rule would be if he’s at risk of being expelled if the class loses an exam.

“His existence is like a fly, that is, absolutely irritating.”

This seemed to be the reason why he had unexpectedly called out to Hirata.

“You’re free to do whatever you want, but what will you do if another exam similar to The Class Vote were to happen? To be honest, as it stands now, nobody else would be in more danger than you.”

“Fufufu. With potential like mine, it doesn’t matter.”

After checking the screen for the elevator to make sure Mii-chan had gotten off, Kōenji stood up.

“That’s right. If I’m not mistaken, you were chosen as the commander for the exam, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not very motivated, so avoid making me have to participate, if you would.”

“Sorry, but the one who decides that is Horikita. I don’t have a say in the matter.”

“You have it backward. As the commander, you hold the right to make that decision, not her.”

He was certainly right as far as the rules were concerned, but... it didn’t seem like I’d be able to convince Kōenji.

“Anyway, I trust that you’ll make the correct decision.”

Leaving me with that, he got on the elevator and returned to his room.

Part 1

I decided to leave the dormitory and search for Hirata.

He probably hadn't gone back to the school building, so he was most likely at Keyaki Mall or at least in the area nearby.

Assuming he didn't want to run into anybody, there was a high probability he was outside somewhere.

Ultimately, I decided to check the entire area.

After about an hour of searching, I came across his distinctive, lonely-looking figure seated on an outside bench.

“Hirata.”

I walked up behind the bench and, once he was within an arm's reach away from me, called out his name.

“...Ayanokōji-kun.”

His response came out slowly as he raised his head to face me, his eyes still downcast.

It had been a long time since I had gotten a good look at his face like this.

He didn't seem to be getting enough sleep, as there were dark circles under his eyes that I had never seen him have before.

“Can you spare some time?”

Upon hearing my request, Hirata's eyes opened up a little bit more.

“I’m sick and tired of all of this. Of everyone coming after me over and over again. I thought you understood me, Ayanokōji-kun. I thought you’d know to just leave me alone. I’m disappointed.”

“Sorry. If you don’t like it, why don’t you push me away like you did to Mii-chan and run away?”

Despite taking the risk and provoking him, Hirata didn’t get up from the bench.

“Spare some time, was it? It doesn’t matter. I don’t have anywhere to hide at this school anyway. I’m so tired today that I don’t even have the energy to run away. But... I don’t think I’ll be able to meet your expectations either.”

In just this short period of time, quite a few other students must’ve tried reaching out to him.

Regardless of whether they were expressing their concern, or offering him encouragement, it must’ve been unbearable for him.

Although I didn’t know ‘who’ exactly had reached out to him, I could imagine ‘what’ they would’ve said.

I was sure they had all attempted to gently comfort him and heal his broken heart.

There, on a bench on the outskirts of campus, the two of us sat together.

“So... you had something to say, right?”

I already knew how Hirata was going to handle this conversation.

He was going to sit there and listen, letting my words go in one ear and out the other.

“I want you to tell me your story.”

“Eh?”

Hirata responded meekly. He had probably expected me to offer him words of sympathy.

“What you were like as a kid, what kind of thoughts you had. I’d like to hear about it.”

“...Why?”

“Who knows. I guess I just want to know for some reason. I’m having a hard time giving you a reason for it.”

Hirata let out a deep sigh before slowly shaking his head.

“I don’t have the energy to reminisce about my past right now. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“You don’t have the energy? Why?”

“Why...? That’s...”

He turned and looked at me, as if to question why I didn’t already know the answer to that.

“Why is it?”

I repeated the question, ignoring the look he gave me.

“...It’s because Yamauchi-kun got expelled.”

He was being forced to say things that he didn’t want to say.

Hirata spoke as if he had been greatly offended, as he was well aware of my intentions.

“You’re making me say some horrible things.”

“I was just curious. I apologize if I’ve offended you.”

“...It’s fine.”

Hirata sighed once again, lacking the motivation to continue the conversation.

He sat with his back hunched over, listlessly shaking his head from side to side.

Pleading for me to leave him alone. Pleading for me to stop caring.

“What does Yamauchi’s expulsion have to do with not talking about your past?”

Confronted with my obstinate request for an answer, Hirata let show a dumbfounded expression for the second time.

“My past doesn’t matter right now, does it?”

“Not necessarily.”

I continued immediately, denying Hirata a chance to shut down the conversation.

“Having one of your classmates expelled is certainly unpleasant. Pretty much anyone would agree with that. But, we don’t have the luxury to regret it forever. The Event Selection Exam is already right around the corner. Not just Horikita and Kushida, but even Ike and Sudō are trying to buckle down and fight. But what about you, Hirata? You’re so hung up on Yamauchi’s expulsion, and even if you tried to cooperate...”

I purposefully stopped speaking for a moment.

And then, I changed the topic to show him I didn't really want to talk about what had happened anymore.

“What I want to know is, what happened in your past that instilled this sense of values in you?”

“What's the point in asking that? Do you really think I'm going to tell you?”

“You'll tell me. Because as you are now, you desperately want other people to know about you.”

In truth, he probably really does want to get everything off his chest. He had ended up like this because he couldn't find a way to do it.

This time, I spoke to him with my eyes.

I looked at him forcefully, almost as if I were threatening him to speak.

Upon seeing the look in my eyes, a sense of fear welled up in his heart.

“I finally understand the reason, the true reason, why Karuizawa-san decided to reveal everything to you, Ayanokōji-kun. She saw your eyes... no, you showed them to her. Those eyes, and that deep, eerie darkness diffused within...”

I slowly ate away the darkness held within Hirata.

This man wasn't simply waiting to die. Day by day, he had been praying for someone to come and save him.

All he could do was reach for the black spider's silk that dangled before him in order to crawl up from the depths of hell.

“I’ve told you once before, haven’t I...? About my friend who I had been close with since childhood? The one who started getting bullied once we got into middle school?”

“Yeah. His name was Sugimura, right?”

“To think you’d even remember his name...”

It was precisely because I knew about this story that I was able to predict Hirata’s mental state.

Back then, he had wanted to help this friend of his, but he was afraid he’d end up getting targeted by the bullies as well.

As a result, he simply ended up watching it happen from the sidelines.

And then—

“My friend... committed suicide by jumping off a building.”

He was probably beginning to recollect what had happened back then.

Little by little, he began opening up about it.

“He managed to just barely hang onto his life, but... he’s been in a coma ever since...”

Hirata tightly clasped his hands together.

“My decisions caused him to take his own life. The weight of my sins will never go away.”

“That isn’t entirely your fault. In fact, the blame mainly falls on the bullies.”

“Sure, but I think being a bystander makes me equally guilty.”

Hirata had said something similar back when we were on the cruise ship. This was the reason why he was always striving to save those around him.

In fact, every time the class ran into problems, Hirata would always be the first one to intervene.

He was the type of man who'd spare no effort to search for a solution.

For example, back when Sudō got into a fight with those guys from Class D, or when he and Kei pretended to be a couple.

However, there were still a few things that hadn't been explained yet.

"I understand that you still have doubts."

Without turning to look at me, Hirata continued.

"Back when my friend attempted to commit suicide. There's actually more to the story..."

He hadn't mentioned this back during the cruise.

"Back when he attempted to commit suicide by jumping from a building, I thought that the whole mess was finally over. That, after making such a heavy sacrifice, there wouldn't be any more bullying in our school. But I was naive. From that day onwards, I saw for myself the unfathomable darkness of human nature."

His body trembled, and I could see something akin to a murderous impulse flash across his eyes.

"The bullies chose a new target, and this time it was one of my own classmates."

As he took a deep breath to suppress his emotions, Hirata began speaking to himself in a hushed tone.

“I couldn’t believe it. Something so horrific had literally just happened, and yet the bullying had already started up again. One of my classmates, who had been nothing more than an innocent bystander, began suffering the same treatment as my friend. And what’s more is that some of our classmates who previously hadn’t been involved with the bullying began joining in on it.”

The scope of the bullying had expanded indefinitely.

“If the person at the bottom of the caste system is gone, it’s only natural that somebody will have to take their place. In a way, it’s part of the natural order of things.”

“I knew I couldn’t allow history to repeat itself. I knew I absolutely had to stop it.”

“So... you took action?”

Hirata nodded his head several times over.

“I did it in a certain way in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes.”

Hirata slowly lifted his head and stared out into the distance in front of him.

“Well, to put it simply, I tried to control the class through fear-mongering.”

“You did that?”

“Yes. I’m not particularly good at fighting like Sudō-kun and Ryūen-kun. However, there aren’t very many people who can seriously hit someone. Even if I were serious enough to throw a punch, nobody would be willing to hit me back.

I alone stood on top while the rest of the class sat at the bottom. By doing so, I was looking to get rid of the bullying. Whenever things started getting out of hand, I'd step in. I gave both sides an equal punishment, equal amounts of pain. My actions were no different than bullying. But, there was at least a brief moment of peace."

Hirata was probably well aware that his actions were by no means justice. That what he had done was wrong.

But even so, he didn't want to acknowledge a world where the people around him were being abused.

"Based on what happened... I find myself wondering if I ended up ruining that year for everyone. They just trudged through each day like lifeless robots who never smiled anymore. At the time, it was the talk of the town back where I lived... It was pretty much treated like a scandal."

"How did the school end up dealing with it?"

"Their response was fairly unprecedented. They forcefully broke up all of the classes for a while, and then redistributed everyone, including me. We were also placed under strict observation until the day we graduated."

With a scandal that famous, it's only natural that it'd end up getting a lot of attention.

In which case, there was no way that this high school hadn't caught wind of it, right?

No, they may actually have chosen to enroll Hirata here precisely because they knew about the scandal.

Either way, I could finally see the reason why Hirata had been placed in Class D.

“You can’t forgive yourself for letting Yamauchi get targeted, can you?”

“Yes... Back then, I thought that as long as it didn’t come to my attention, I could just pretend not to know about it. I had wanted to just keep quiet about it until the day of the vote.”

Ultimately, Horikita’s actions back then led to him being marked as unnecessary.

“I’m just useless. I never should’ve tried to keep the class together in the first place. Despite doing everything I could, I still couldn’t protect Yamauchi-kun... You probably knew that already, Ayanokōji-kun. I just can’t do it anymore. In order to protect someone, I’ve even thought about using fear tactics again. I get that I should know better. That it’d be a mistake, and yet...”

Hirata’s voice trembled.

His heart was on the brink of collapsing.

He felt like the entire class should share the load, through both the good times and the bad.

He couldn’t bear the thought of somebody suffering. Of somebody disappearing.

Yes, he had probably always been questioning himself each time something happened. And he probably always will.

It wasn’t clear if he had confided in Mii-chan and the other students and if he had, just to what extent.

However, I could easily imagine what sort of things they’d end up saying to him.

『There's nothing you could've done.』

『It's not your fault, Hirata-kun.』

『Yamauchi only has himself to blame for betraying the class.』

No matter who it was, they would end up saying that Hirata was in the right and somebody else was in the wrong.

That simply wasn't going to change.

And because of this, it's unlikely that the problem would ever be solved.

There was no point in telling Hirata to blame the very person he had set out to protect.

Instead, that would only end up making him retreat back into his shell even more.

“There's something I want to make clear to you. It's not Horikita's fault that Yamauchi got expelled from the school, and, of course, it's not my fault either. You know that, right?”

“...Yes. It was unavoidable. There was nothing we could've done about it. ...And I don't blame you either.”

He quietly added in that last part.

To Hirata, it probably sounded like I was emphasizing that it wasn't my fault.

It would've sounded like I was asking him if he had some sort of grudge held against me.

“Who do you think is responsible for Yamauchi's departure from Class C? From this school?”

“I think... he has nobody to blame but himself.”

This was the conclusion Hirata had come to, though he didn't want to admit to it.

Yamauchi had suffered the consequences of his own actions. Expulsion was the natural consequence of his lack of ability and lazy lifestyle.

“That's not true.”

I denied it. I straight up kicked Hirata's naive idea to the curb.

“It's your fault that Yamauchi got expelled, Hirata.”

“...!”

He raised his head and looked at me.

The expression on his face was telling me that he couldn't understand what I had said.

“If you really wanted to save Yamauchi, you should've done everything in your power to make it happen.”

“B-but- I tried my best! There was nothing more I could've done!”

“Ichinose's Class B didn't lose a single person.”

“That- But that's because she was a special case. We didn't have a huge amount of private points like she did!”

“In which case, the problem is that you failed to lead the class like that. You should've been saving up points for the past year like Ichinose so you could save somebody when they're about to be expelled.”

As a result, Yamauchi wouldn't have been expelled, and there would still be forty people in our class.

“Impossible. We lost all of our Class Points just after we enrolled here. And, even if we hadn't, there's no way that our classmates would have agreed to hand over their points. You do know that, right?”

“Between ending up with zero Class Points and failing to lead the class, either way, it's still your responsibility.”

No matter how much Hirata may try to escape, the fact that it was his fault wouldn't change.

“Unreasonable. That's unreasonable.”

“Yeah, it's unreasonable. But it can't be helped. You chose to walk down that path. You should've kept this fantasy you have of wanting to save everyone to yourself. That way, no matter who ends up expelled from school, the blame wouldn't fall on you. But, if you keep projecting your feelings on the people around you, you have to bear the full responsibility when it doesn't end up working out. You should be resolved for at least that much.”

“I-I'm-!”

“I had the wrong idea about you. I thought you were an honor student, a man of character who was well respected by many of our classmates. But, I guess you're not. You're just a shallow, incompetent student who boasts about things you can't even do. That, Hirata Yōsuke, is the type of person you are.”

This was an excessively extreme argument followed through to its logical conclusion. He was by no means an incompetent person.

Hirata was such an exceptionally talented person that his capabilities went well beyond what's expected of a first-year high school student.

There was nothing wrong with him saying he wanted to protect everyone, and just because he failed to do so doesn't mean that he's responsible.

But even so, I still blamed him.

I forced the blame on him until the bitter end.

I put him under heavy pressure, relentlessly driving him into a corner until he was about to break.

Was I doing this for Hirata's sake? No.

Was I looking to empower him so that he could better protect everyone? No.

There was no way he could protect everyone.

And, there would definitely be even more expulsions at some point later on as well.

I was doing this because, when that time comes, Hirata would be necessary to keep the class operating smoothly.

“Just how long are you going to keep dreaming?”

Hirata simply hadn't moved on from how things were back in middle school. He hadn't moved on from doing only what was required of him.

It was up to you to decide whether or not you'd continue your education into high school, and it was up to you to decide whether or not you'd stay there.

“This... This is your true nature, isn’t it? Your words are so terrible, ruthless, cold...”

I could see tears start welling up in Hirata’s right eye.

And before long, he sat there crying in front of me.

“You’re free to wish for whatever you want. But if you really want to see your wishes come true, you at least need to fight for it until the very end. Strive to do whatever you can. There’s no other way. If there end up being expulsions along the way, you have no other choice but to accept it. Even so, you still have to keep moving forward.”

“How cruel...”

“If you stop now, the students around you are going to fall behind and disappear one after another. That’s why, if you keep walking forward, if you keep your eyes on your goal, then there will surely still be people standing behind you after everything is over.”

It takes an awful lot of courage to lead others.

You never know what kind of obstacles you may face, and you could always fall down at any moment.

“But... Then... How do I vent frustrations...? Do I have to keep moving forward all alone? Bottling up everything deep inside?”

“Not at all. When you’re feeling troubled, you can rely on your classmates. Horikita, Kushida, Sudō and Ike, Mii-chan and Shinohara, it doesn’t matter who.

You can vent your frustrations to whoever it is that you rely on. We're all in this together."

There's no such thing as a rule stating that leaders aren't allowed to show weakness.

The people who stand behind them can always be there to lend a hand in case they're about to fall.

Our classmates should be more than willing to listen to Hirata vent his frustrations.

"I... I... I wonder... if it's okay for someone like me to lead everyone...?"

"It's alright. As you are now, it's okay for you to take the lead."

I placed my hand on his shoulder.

With this small gesture, even more tears began to pour.

To bury the past.

To get rid of the huge, cumbersome burden that Hirata had been carrying once and for all.

He, who had been stuck and unable to move, could once again stand up on his own two feet.

"Thank you... Thank you, Ayanokōji-kun..."

He hung his head, countless tears falling from his face.

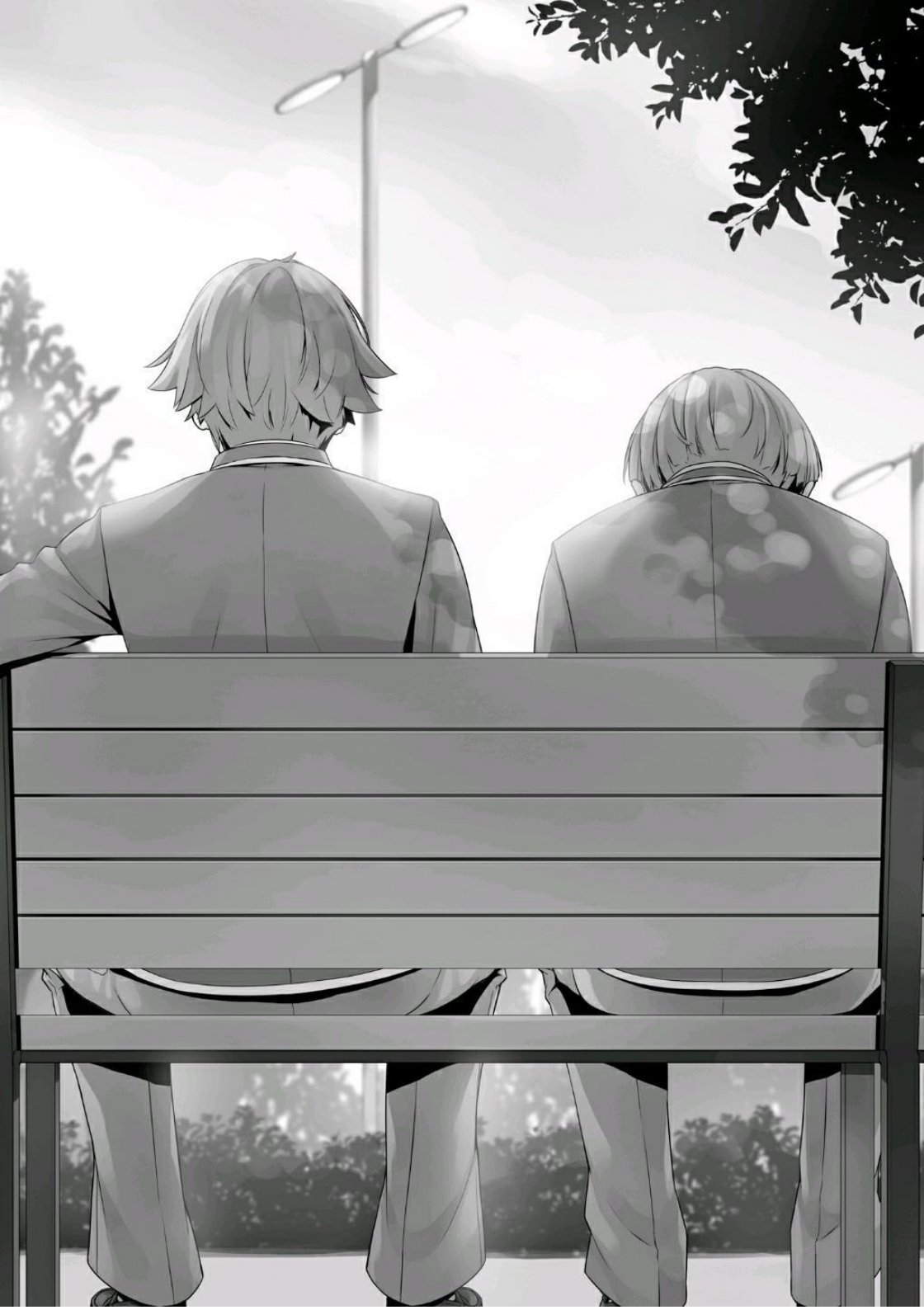
Men are troublesome, difficult creatures who can't cry in front of others very easily.

That's why I also wanted a friendship where nobody was forced to hide their tears from one another.

As for this, no more words needed to be said.

All that he needed was a friend at his side, somebody who would lend him their ear and hear out his frustrations.

As long as he did- he could start walking forward once again.



Part 2

With the break of dawn, the next day had come.

The final special exam of the school year was fast approaching.

By the time I arrived at the classroom, Hirata was nowhere to be seen. Mii-chan's expression was also still somewhat clouded over.

Despite the fact that everyone was trying not to think about him, nobody could stop themselves from worrying.

And then he, the indispensable figure for all of Class C, showed up at the classroom.

By this point, everyone was reluctant to so much as look at him.

“G-good morning... Hirata-kun.”

But, sure enough, Mii-chan reached out and greeted Hirata before anyone else.

She held back her sadness, giving it her all to force herself to smile.

Having noticed this himself, Hirata drew closer to her.

“I”

Mii-chan froze up for a moment, reminded of the events that had taken place the day before.

Upon seeing her reaction, Hirata whole-heartedly bowed his head to apologize.

“Good morning, Mii-chan. I'm sorry about what happened yesterday. I've done something very terrible to you.”

“...Eh?”

Hirata’s apologetic words were filled with emotion.

“And, I ignored you even though you went to the moon and back trying to comfort me. I’m so sorry.”

“T-that’s, uhm... I completely...”

It wasn’t just Mii-chan, the entire class had been left speechless by Hirata’s sudden change in behavior.

“Everyone else too... Good morning!”

Hirata had come to school with a smile so bright and full of energy that his past actions felt like nothing more than a hallucination.

“H-Hirata-kun?”

“I’m okay now. Really, everything is alright.”

As he spoke, he reassured Mii-chan with a gentle smile on his face. Then, he turned and lowered his head to the entire class.

“It may be too late to apologize at this point, but... if it’s alright with everyone, I’d like to do what I can to help the class once again from today on.”

Hirata spoke without raising his head.

For several seconds, everyone, boys and girls alike, exchanged glances with each other, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

But—

“Hirata-kun!!”

At first, a few of the girls rushed over to Hirata's side, but before long, he had been surrounded by most of his classmates.

Presented with Hirata's long-awaited return, every single student in class was over the moon.

"What happened?"

Horikita turned and asked me. She had stayed in her seat, unable to make sense of the scene playing out in front of her.

"I told you it was a collective effort, didn't I?"

"That's... true, but... don't you think he might be forcing himself?"

"Is that what it looks like to you?"

"Well, I guess not."

"Different people take different amounts of time to get over something. On the day after getting into a huge fight, most people tend to get along with each other as if nothing had happened in the first place."

Human relationships were just like that.

After accepting a warm welcome from the rest of the class, Hirata turned and approached his final opponent, Horikita.

"Good morning, Horikita-san."

He stared at Horikita with honest, clear eyes.

"Y-yes. Good morning."

Perhaps Horikita was shaken by how unexpectedly radiant Hirata was right now.

“I don’t think I was wrong during the class trial the other day.”

“...I see.”

“But... I don’t think you were wrong either. Or, no, I should say that what you did was right.”

This was something he simply couldn’t accept at the time.

But now, he had come to terms with it.

“I just didn’t realize it at the time.”

“Did you hit your head or something? You’re completely different today than you were yesterday, and it doesn’t seem like you’re just putting up a bold front either...”

Despite Horikita’s suspicions, Hirata simply let show a carefree smile.

“I’m going to do my best to earn back the trust I’ve lost. I’d like it if you’d fill me in on the details of the special exam later.”

“I understand. I’ll let you get a grasp of the situation and test to see whether or not you’re actually up to the task. Is that alright with you?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Hirata extended his hand as a final notion of reconciliation, to which Horikita reached out and accepted.

After that, Hirata was once again swarmed by his peers, one after another. The classroom had become so bright and cheerful that it was hard to imagine that it

had been immersed in such a pitch-black, gloomy atmosphere only just a few minutes ago.

“Anyway, I guess this means we’re finally ready to face the special exam.”

“I guess so.”

It might be fair to say that Hirata’s return was the best support Class C could’ve asked for.

Kōenji, on the other hand, was the only one who didn’t seem affected by it.

AYANOKŌJI VS. SAKAYANAGI

After a lengthy period of preparation, the day of the first years' final special exam had finally arrived.

As per the rules, the commanders of the losing classes would be expelled from the school. However, this time, they would be stripped of their protection point instead.

The two commanders in charge of the defeated classes would lose the protection point that they had earned during the provisional exam.

While there wouldn't be any expulsions, it was important to keep in mind that the Class Points would probably fluctuate dramatically.

Depending on the outcome of the exam, there was a good chance that the standings of each class would be affected.

"Today, I want you to forget about all the notes and pointers I've given you."

As I waited for morning homeroom to begin, Horikita spoke up from her seat beside me.

"Choose whichever five events you want, and then pick whoever you want to participate in them."

"If I take charge and mess up your plans, wouldn't the rest of the class be unable to adapt to it?"

“I never told anyone which events I’d be choosing or which events they’d be participating in. I simply said that I’d be making those decisions pragmatically depending on the situation, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

In other words, she had thoroughly set the stage for me to compete without running into any issues.

“Don’t blame me if something goes wrong.”

“This is a class competition. Even though the commanders are allowed to intervene, the exam basically boils down to the strength of our class as a whole. The opponent we’ll be facing is Class A, led by Sakayanagi-san. The most formidable opponent in our school year. Even if you lose, it’s not like anyone would blame you.”

I cast Horikita a sidelong glance and took a look at the last message she had sent me the night before.

It was a record of everything Class C had done to prepare for the special exam these past two weeks.

There was information on what each student had shared in the class discussions, which events they had tried, and how much they had practiced.

“I’ll make the most of your efforts.”

As I got up from my seat, ready to go do what I needed to do, Horikita left me with a few words.

“The odds of chess getting chosen are 7 out of 10. A 70% chance isn’t exactly low.”

Over the past couple of days, Horikita and I had played several matches of chess against each other.

“In the end, I hardly ever won against you, even with you going easy on me.”

It was true that the number of times she had beaten me were few and far between. However, there was no need for her to keep track of it. In this short period of time, Horikita’s chess skills had improved considerably.

“Nobody is stronger than me, even when I’m going easy on them. Remember that.”

“You sure have a lot of confidence in yourself.”

Having wrapped up my conversation with Horikita, I set off to go fulfill my duties as the commander.

The remaining students were pretty much on standby in the main classroom, waiting to receive instructions from the multipurpose room.

After an event is announced, the participants would then change their clothes and go to the designated location. The finer details of the event wouldn’t be shared on the monitors, so the students in the main classroom would have to wait for the participants to get back to learn what happened.

Part 1

I headed over to the special building and went to the designated location for the commanders. There, Sakayanagi and Ichinose, who had arrived before me, were engaged in idle chatter with each other. From the looks of it, we weren't allowed to enter the multipurpose room yet.

“Good morning to you, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Mornin', Ayanokōji-kun.”

They both greeted me at the same time, and I lightly raised my hand in response.

“It doesn't seem like we're allowed to go in just yet.”

“They told us to let them know once all four of us arrived.”

That is to say, the school was looking to ensure that the exam was carried out in a fair manner.

If you were to enter the multipurpose room before the other commanders, you'd be able to calm your mind and adjust to the atmosphere of the testing grounds before anyone else.

And, as this was a particularly special exam, there was no such thing as overdoing it when it came to ensuring fairness.

“It seems we're just waiting on Kaneda now.”

“Yep.”

I took a look around. While there was still no sign of Kaneda, there was no way he'd risk being late.

“At any rate, you sure are lucky, Ichinose-san.”

“Eh? Lucky?”

“As they are now, Class D is no different than an infant. Their chances of beating your class are pretty much nonexistent. All you have to do now is to see just how many wins you can pile up. If you win seven events in a row, Class B might even change places with Class A. That is, depending on how Class A performs.”

“Oh no, there's no way to tell what's going to happen. They'll probably be desperate, so we definitely can't let our guards down.”

Upon seeing Ichinose steel her resolve like this, Sakayanagi let show an amused smile. This prompted Ichinose to speak up again.

“Huh? Did I say something weird?”

“No. You just spoke like you're at the top, ready to take on anyone. At the very least, I understand that you don't view Class D as your equals. Just what I expected from the one who managed to protect Class B for an entire year.”

Sakayanagi's words were slightly mean-spirited. However, Ichinose didn't let it get to her.

“Class B also came here with a strategy, ready to win. We won't lose easily, especially in an exam like this where unity and cooperation play such an important part.”

“I see. That was quite rude of me. It certainly is as you say, Ichinose-san.”

I stared out the nearby window as I listened in on their conversation.

With April right around the corner, the weather today was bright and sunny. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky.

Like that, about five minutes or so passed. Before long, it began to dawn on us that he might be late.

Finally, we heard the faint sound of footsteps approaching from the other end of the hallway.

“Well, it doesn't seem like he'll be late after all. I guess he didn't lose his nerve and give up either.”

Sakayanagi expressed her thoughts, amused that Kaneda would be showing up at the last possible moment.

Ichinose also seemed to be bracing herself as the exam was finally about to begin.

We each took the liberty of envisioning what was about to happen.

That is, we would join up with Kaneda after he arrived, and the four of us would enter the multipurpose room together.

However—

An unexpected person showed up instead.

Upon seeing who it was, Ichinose let show a completely dumbfounded expression.

While Sakayanagi was just as surprised as Ichinose, her expression quickly changed as she narrowed her eyes in amusement.

“...Ryūen-kun? Why... Why are you here...?”

A clear, distinctive feeling of unrest coursed through Ichinose.

No, neither I nor Sakayanagi had seen this coming either.

“What’s wrong with you? What’s got ya shaking there?”

Ryūen, the former leader of Class D, deliberately drew attention to Ichinose’s trembling.

“I see... I hadn’t expected this to happen. It seems I had wrongly convinced myself that the commanders for this special exam would be those of us who received protection points.”

Sakayanagi was the first to put the pieces together. Indeed, this man, Ryūen, had come here alone. Kaneda was nowhere to be seen.

“The special exam can’t even start without the commanders. In other words, if it just so happens that the commander is absent, then someone else’ll naturally have to fill in for ‘em. Ain’t that right?”

An unforeseen absence on the very day of the exam was certainly something that could happen.

There was probably some sort of system in place where one or two people would be ready as substitutes for the commander’s position.

And, of course, the substitute commander would be the one to take responsibility should their class lose the exam.

“Even so, I never even considered that you might show up, Ryūen-kun.”

“Well, duh? Considering the type of person you are, Ichinose, even if you broke out in a fever or got yourself injured, you’d come crawling here on your hands and knees to prevent your classmates from having to risk getting expelled.”

If they lose the exam, there would be no way to prevent the commander’s expulsion other than using a protection point. Just as Sakayanagi had said, the preconceived notion that the people with protection points would end up becoming the commanders had been a critical misconception.

Ichinose nervously cleared her throat.

Back when the special exam was first announced, Ichinose naturally must’ve been at least a little bit cautious about who the opposing commanders would be. However, when Kaneda showed up as the commander back when the class matchups were decided, she probably ended up dismissing this possibility altogether.

In her head, the process of elimination had probably happened without her even realizing it.

She ended up concluding that the special exam would be a competition between the students who had gotten their hands on protection points.

“Surely there must be some sort of penalty for you to participate as a substitute, right?”

“Yeah, Kaneda isn’t allowed to participate in any events. It ain’t that unreasonable.”

Ryūen was saying that this penalty was something he had already taken into consideration.

“Did you do this to throw me off? Even if you did, isn’t it disadvantageous for you that Kaneda-kun can’t participate?”

While I didn’t know the full extent of Kaneda’s abilities, he was most likely a vital asset for Class D.

This meant that they had come up with a clever scheme that involved giving up on Kaneda’s potential. Subconsciously, it would lead one to start pondering why.

When had they decided that Ryūen would become the commander? If it was from the very beginning, did that mean that this had all been planned from the start? With questions like these running through her mind, Ichinose was probably terribly confused right now.

“Oi, don’t be so wary of me will ya? I’m just their sacrifice. If my class loses, the commander’ll get expelled. It’s a perfect chance for those Class D guys to kick me outta here. That’s all there is to it, aight?”

“Then, are you saying you’ll go easy on me?”

“Kuku. Yeah, I’ll ease up on ya, so just chill out and come at me.”

Ryūen spread his arms, welcoming her to come at him, but there was no way Ichinose was going to fall for it.

“When you want to win, you’re the type to pull out every trick in the book. That’s how you fight, isn’t it?”

“If I want to win, then sure.”

“I wish you wouldn’t. You don’t have a protection point and you’re fighting with your back up against the wall. Somehow I can’t help but feel like this is a bad omen for Class B.”

Ichinose is the type of person who prefers to build trust, confidence, and safety from the ground up. Because of that, her capacity to deal with sudden accidents was by no means one of her strong suits. While this wouldn’t be much of a problem against an average opponent, it was a different story altogether against somebody like Ryūen.

Perhaps the shock would soon spread from Ichinose to the entirety of Class B.

Everyone in her class would inevitably notice that Ryūen had become the commander.

And, even if they didn’t, Ishizaki and the others would surely make it well-known anyway.

In which case, the rest of Class B wouldn’t be able to hide their distress, just like Ichinose.

If Ryūen had become the commander despite having stepped down as the leader of Class D, the unpredictable nature of his instructions would be a lingering cause for alarm.

“It seems the showdown between Class B and D is going to be quite intriguing as well.”

It probably wasn’t so much of a laughing matter for Ichinose like it was for Sakayanagi, though.

She really should've taken action back when Class D was repeatedly stalking her classmates.

If she had caught onto the fact that Ryūen had been lurking behind the scenes earlier on, it probably wouldn't have come as this much of a shock to her now.

“Well, seeing as we're all here, let's go, shall we?”

With Sakayanagi leading the way, we entered the multipurpose room. A wall that hadn't been there the last time we were here had been constructed, dividing the inside of the room into two distinct halves. For an improvised, temporary wall, it seemed to be quite sturdy and soundproof. The four homeroom teachers in charge of the first year had been on standby waiting for us.

“Those from Class B and Class D, please move over there.”

Per Mashima-sensei's instructions, the two of them disappeared to the other side of the partitioning wall with Chabashira following behind them.

The facilitators for Class A and Class C were Class D's Sakagami-sensei and Class B's Hoshinomiya-sensei.

From the looks of it, the teachers weren't in charge of proctoring the exam for their own classes.

“The test will start in five minutes. Take this time to compose yourselves while you can.”

Leaving us with this piece of advice, Hoshinomiya-sensei then took Sakagami-sensei aside to have what seemed to be one final talk about the preparations for the exam.

Before the exam, Sakayanagi and I had a few minutes alone together, just the two of us.

“Finally... The day I’ve been waiting for has finally arrived. To be honest, I couldn’t sleep last night, and I almost overslept this morning.”

“I don’t remember making you wait so long. It’s just a coincidence that you met me in the first place.”

“Are you saying that, if you hadn’t come to this school, we wouldn’t have met?”

As I nodded in response, she laughed, promptly denying it.

“Our reunion at this school was indeed a mere coincidence. But, I was confident that I’d meet you again sooner or later. It was fate, decided long ago.”

“Fate, huh? You’re saying some pretty abstract things.”

“Well, I am a young lady, after all.”

Sakayanagi smiled as she spoke, slowly approaching me with her cane in hand.



“If you hadn’t enrolled in this school, I would’ve just postponed this for another three years or so. I was confident I could pass the time without rushing things, hiding my feelings of anticipation deep inside. But, that simply doesn’t work anymore. Ever since I found out you were within my reach, every passing day has just felt so long. It has been so very difficult to subdue my feelings; To subdue my burning desire to compete with you. That’s just how much I’ve been dreaming of today.”

Sakayanagi spoke eloquently. Her wish was finally being granted, was it?

“Aren’t you afraid to wake up from your dream?”

Once our competition happens, there would be no going back.

“Dreams have to be woken up from at some point.”

She didn’t seem to care. The only thing on her mind was that today was the day her dreams would finally be realized.

“Normally... I’d ask you to go easy on me, but...”

The look in her eyes was not what you’d expect from a young girl. It carried a certain kind of sharpness that you’d see from a hunter going after its prey.

“Please, face me with everything you’ve got.”

If I were to compete with her half-heartedly, Sakayanagi wouldn’t be happy with that in the slightest.

While I wasn’t doing this in order to make her happy, it’d be far too troublesome to get involved with her any more than this.

But, I also had my doubts as to whether or not this special exam would be enough to satisfy her.

Then, as if she had read my mind, Sakayanagi spoke up again.

“I’d be lying if I told you I didn’t feel conflicted. This special exam is far too inadequate for us to fully demonstrate the extent of our potential. Even though we’re both commanders, our ability to intervene is limited.”

The school would never carry out an unreasonable exam where the outcome depended solely on the actions of the commanders.

Sakayanagi was saying that, as long as there was an outcome, the inadequacy of the exam was trivial.

“Be that as it may, if the commander’s ability to intervene wasn’t limited, we’d run into a different problem. I believe it’s important to take your situation into consideration as well, Ayanokōji-kun. You don’t want your classmates to find out about your true abilities, right?”

Indeed, this consideration of hers was something I was quite grateful for. If the commander were to have a large amount of influence over the outcomes of every single event, I probably wouldn’t be able to make the most of it.

“Okaaay, the exam will begin any second now~ Please take a seat~”

As Hoshinomiya-sensei’s instruction came flying, we both sat down across from each other at our designated computers.

Naturally, we couldn't see each others' faces with the computer screens placed between us. On my screen, there were the portrait photographs of each student in Class C.

Excluding me, there were 38 pictures in total. Once the first selected event was announced, we'd be using these pictures to assign the students that we wanted to go and participate.

Next, the ten events Class C had come up with were displayed on the screen.

"My name is Sakagami, and I'll be the one hosting the special exam. Without any further delay, let's begin the final special exam of the first year. Each of you, please select the five events you'd like to be considered and press 'confirm' when you're done."

I selected the five events that Horikita had in mind and pressed confirm immediately.

Before long, Sakayanagi finished making her choices as well, and a total of ten events were displayed on the large monitor in the room.

For Class C's events, I had chosen Archery, Basketball, Table Tennis, Typing, and Tennis. I had toyed around with the idea of throwing in an interesting event like Rock Paper Scissors, but I ultimately decided against it.

I had discarded the idea of using our English event since it overlapped with Class A's English Test event. Despite the fact that Hirata and Onodera specialized in Football and Swimming, I decided not to go with those events because they would most likely be useful in another event somewhere down the line.

Moreover, my strategy was for Class C to focus primarily on athletic events instead of academics.

For Class A's events, Sakayanagi had chosen Chess, English, Modern Literature, Math, and Flash Mental Arithmetic. There were ten events in total. She had chosen all three of the events that Katsuragi predicted she would, and both of the events he had mentioned as a runner-up had also made it in. He had truly given Keisei and me a perfect answer.

Though, it didn't end up changing anything, and that's because I had deliberately chosen not to tell Horikita about what Keisei and I had learned.

"Moving forward, we'll hold a completely randomized drawing to determine each of the seven events that you'll be competing in."

"Anywho, Ayanokōji-kun~ It sure is a shame that you're gonna have to go up against somebody like Sakayanagi-san. Sensei feels so sorry for you."

"Hoshinomiya-sensei. You know the rules."

"Yes, sir~ Sorry for speaking out of turn~"

Upon being reprimanded by her colleague, Hoshinomiya-sensei lowered her head in apology.

"The result of the drawing will be displayed on the large monitor in the center of the room, so please do take a look."

As he spoke, Sakagami-sensei motioned toward the monitor, where the screen had changed over to something else.

There was a 3D image that had all of the events in consideration displayed together.

And then, the first event was selected.

『Basketball』 Required Participants: 5 ▪ Time Restriction: 20 Minutes Total
(Two Halves with a 4 Minute Intermission)

Rules: Standard basketball rules apply.

Commander Intervention: The commander is allowed to perform up to one substitution at any given time.

It was a five-on-five match in an event that Class C had chosen.

In other words, it was an event we absolutely couldn't afford to lose.

“Sakagami-sensei. Are we students free to speak with one another?”

“There are no rules against it. Do as you wish.”

“That is, we're free to wage a war of words?”

Sakayanagi directly stated what her intention was, and yet Sakagami-sensei still didn't see a problem with it.

“Uwaa~ Sakayanagi-san is soooo merciless!”

Hoshinomiya-sensei chimed in again. She had probably interpreted this as Sakayanagi gaining full permission to launch a merciless assault against me.

“Hoshinomiya-sensei.”

“Eep! I'm sorry! I won't speak out of turn anymore!”

While the students were free to speak, it seemed that the teachers were not. Hoshinomiya-sensei had been reprimanded time and again.

“Unsurprisingly, Class C ended up choosing a small number of sporting events. Although, I suppose it’s perfectly understandable considering how few of your classmates can study effectively. Sudō-kun is probably the central figure of this basketball event too, wouldn’t you say? After all, he’s one of the best basketball players in this school. I don’t think you stand a chance against us if you don’t make proper use of him.”

Sakayanagi jumped at the opportunity to speak her mind, looking to get me to engage with her, but I intentionally chose to keep quiet.

If at all possible, I wanted to avoid making too much of an impression on Hoshinomiya-sensei and Sakagami-sensei.

“Did Horikita-san, the true commander of Class C, order you not talk with me unless you had to?”

Upon seeing that I still wasn’t going to respond, she continued.

“If so, even if you say something, it shouldn’t affect who you end up selecting. Do you disagree?”

Sakayanagi was also well aware that I was looking to limit my words while we were in front of the teachers.

“Horikita warned me not to say anything excessive to you. She said that if I’m not careful with what I say, I’ll just get caught up in one of your tricks and have the tables turned on me.”

“Fufu. That’s no good, Ayanokōji-kun. You’ve already gone and provided me with important information. The identity of the mastermind controlling you from the shadows is something you should’ve kept hidden. If you go ahead and confess that it’s Horikita-san, you do know that I’ll be able to infer things based on her personality and behavioral patterns, right?”

“No, that’s... That doesn’t necessarily mean that she’s the one instructing me.”

“Didn’t you just say it yourself, though? That Horikita-san told you what to do?”

Upon seeing Sakayanagi let out a chuckle, Hoshinomiya-sensei put her palm on her forehead as an ‘uh oh’ leaked out of her mouth.

Sakagami-sensei was also taken aback. He stood there, shaking his head, watching as Sakayanagi extracted information out of me all too easily.

“No, I just said that Horikita warned me... The instructions could’ve come from somebody else.”

“Could’ve? In a situation like this, you won’t get yourself anywhere if you don’t state definitively that it was somebody else, even if it’s a lie.”

Not only did Sakayanagi see through what I had been trying to do, but she even spoke up to support me in doing so.

This exchange alone must’ve been more than enough to convey the overwhelming difference in power between the two of us.

Now that we had worked together to trick both of the teachers who were watching over us, the special exam would truly begin.

“What does it matter anyway? Class C came to face this exam after carefully thinking about what strategies you would come up with, Sakayanagi. Even if you’ve realized that Horikita is the one that came up with our strategy, then all that’s done is level the playing field.”

“My goodness, you’ve gone and admitted to it so straightforwardly. Though, since when was I the one who came up with Class A’s strategy, exactly? Just like you, Ayanokouji-kun, I have as many minds to help me decide things as I do classmates. Did it ever occur to you that Class A could’ve also chosen to face this exam after running through all sorts of simulations on what Class C might do?”

“That’s—”

Dozens of seconds had passed since the teachers had given her permission to engage in a war of words with me.

Unable to stand and watch this happen any longer, Sakagami-sensei pushed forward with the exam.

“Do remember that time is limited. While I did say that you were free to speak with one another, please don’t neglect your task at hand.”

Of course, my conversation with Sakayanagi had absolutely no effect on my mental state.

The only ones who were worried here were the teachers. For me, and also Sakayanagi, this was nothing more than an idle conversation.

Once the both of us had finished making our choices, the list of students who’d be participating in the basketball event was announced.

Class C's participants were Makida Susumu, Minami Setsuya, Ike Kanji, Hondō Ryotarō, and Onodera Kayano. Critically, Sudō was not among them. Furthermore, I had even included a girl in our lineup. The team's ace was Makida. According to Sudō, as long as Makida practiced for it, he should be skilled enough to pass the exam. In addition, although Onodera's true specialty was swimming, her basketball skills didn't seem to be all that bad. From the looks of it, Horikita had decided that choosing her would be better for the team than choosing a boy who didn't have any experience. As for our opponent, Class A chose Machida Kōji, Toba Shigeru, Kamuro Masumi, Shimizu Naoki, and Kitō Hayato. Sakayanagi had thrown a girl into the mix as well.

According to the information I had gathered from Hirata, Kei, and Kushida, the team I had chosen should be more than ready to take home the win.

Sakagami-sensei was standing over near Sakayanagi, so I couldn't see his face very clearly. However, Hoshinomiya-sensei was standing near me, and I could easily see hers. At a glance, I could tell that she had her doubts about the participants I had chosen.

After all, Sudō Ken, the man considered to be the main focus of the basketball event, was nowhere to be seen.

Of course, this was a strategy that Horikita and the rest of Class C had decided upon, not me.

Though, it's only natural that Sakayanagi would see through a strategy like this.

“So you’re looking to win without using Sudō-kun, is that it? With reflexes like his, it wouldn’t be all that unusual for him to succeed at both tennis and table tennis as well. Well, either way, it’s all within the realm of my expectations.”

With Sudō in the lead, we would’ve been able to safely guarantee ourselves the win. Meanwhile, Class A wouldn’t be very happy about seeing basketball get selected. After all, Sudō is the first person who comes to mind the moment anyone thinks of the basketball event. Class A’s chances of winning would be quite a lot lower if they were to take on a basketball team led by Sudō, and they knew that.

In which case, the next logical conclusion for Class A would be to avoid making the mistake of wasting any of their skilled students on the basketball event.

Then, with Sudō out of the way, Class A might have the upper hand in the sporting events that would come later on.

In light of this, Class C intentionally made the decision to not use Sudō in the basketball event. If at all possible, we wanted to preserve his valuable potential that could shine in the remaining sporting events.

Whether or not Sudō had already participated in an event would also be a deciding factor in case the tennis or table tennis events were to get chosen later on.

However, based on the people in Class A’s lineup, it seems that Sakayanagi had seen through this short-sighted plan of ours.

“By the way, who was it that came up with these rules regarding commander intervention? Was this also Horikita-san’s idea? You do realize that it completely exposed what your goal was, right?”

“Sorry, but I can’t answer that.”

“Is that right? If you can’t answer, then I suppose it can’t be helped.”

On the other side of the monitor, we watched as the preparations for the event went underway. The match would be starting soon.

In the meantime, the only thing we’d be able to do is sit and watch the event unfold.

As the commanders, our only means of influencing this event was our ability to substitute one of the players.

But, that one, single decision could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

At the sound of a whistle, a strenuous 10-minute match of basketball began.

At first, even though they didn’t have Sudō on the team, Class C was almost equally matched with Class A.

The moment one team scored a lead, the other would come right back and equalize it. It was truly a neck-and-neck match.

Even the teachers found their eyes being drawn to the fierce battle unfolding on the monitor, completely unsure of who exactly would win.

As the one chosen to take Sudō’s place, Makida wasn’t bad at all. Even though he was nowhere near as good as Sudō, his above-average skills allowed him to

carry out the role of the team's ace quite well. On the other hand, Class A's ace was none other than Kitō, who was proving himself to be an equal match for Makida every step of the way.

By the point halftime came around, there was only a one-point gap in the score at 12 to 11.

Class C had only just barely taken the lead.

“An interesting match, this one.”

Sakayanagi expressed her thoughts on the match. It would be hard to say which team would win during the second half.

The second half of the match was set to begin after a brief four-minute intermission. However, Sakayanagi still didn't make her move. Even though Class C was leading by one point, she still seemed to think that the two teams were equal in strength, and was instead looking to see how the match would play out. I, however, reached out for the keyboard in front of me without the slightest bit of hesitation. I made the decision and called for Sudō to swap out with Ike.

It's certainly true that, at a glance, the two teams seemed to be evenly matched. It seemed like there was no way to tell how the game would play out.

For the last ten minutes, I had been quite torn over whether or not I should substitute Sudō into the match.

“Fufu.”

Sakayanagi let out a faint chuckle. It didn't seem like she had any intention of letting me preserve Sudō's potential.

Before long, Sudō arrived on the other side of the monitor, warmed up and ready to go.

Even though it wouldn't be surprising if he had his doubts about being called in at this point, his expression was still extremely serious.

From the looks of it, Sudō inevitably seemed to realize the same thing that I had.

“Both teams are evenly matched. Or, no, Class C is winning right now. Isn't your decision to call in Sudō a bit premature?”

“I just thought I should guarantee that we pick up the win.”

“This is quite an important first match, so I understand how you feel. After all, there's no way to be sure that tennis or table tennis will get chosen after this. There's no reason to hold onto Sudō-kun if there's no event that can make proper use of him.”

“Shouldn't you be swapping out one of your players as well?”

“There's no need for that. I chose a winning lineup from the very beginning.”

Kitō, who had been marking Makida, switched over to marking Sudō.

From the main classroom, Sudō should've been watching over the entire match since it first started.

Furthermore, Sudō should've already noticed the difference in their abilities.

After the 4-minute intermission was over, the second half of the match started.

Kitō guarded against Sudō tightly, and his movements were about twice as sharp as they were earlier.

[I knew it...! You bastard, so you were holding back, eh!?]

We could hear Sudō's voice yelling through the monitor.

I knew from the beginning that Class A had been holding back in order to drag Sudō out onto the court.

However, there was no way to tell just how much of their potential they had been hiding until Sudō tried his hand against them.

Kitō fought fiercely, but Sudō was still a level above him.

He shook off Kitō's defense and forced his way into Class A's territory.

In order to stop him, Class A's entire team desperately tried to hold back Sudō's advances.

Despite the fact that Sudō was a head and shoulders above the rest, Class A's players still seemed to be a step above his teammates.

The score was 17 to 13. While the point difference had grown wider, instead of slowing down, the opposing team's movements gradually began to pick up pace.

[Oi Kitō, you son of a bitch, you know what you're doin', don't you!?]

[Nah. You're just being pressured by a bunch of amateurs.]

[You liar!]

[Why would I be lying? My friends and I have only been practicing for less than a week now. It seems you've got a lot of confidence in your basketball skills, but you're not all that impressive.]

[You bastard!]

Since there was no cheering going on in the background, we could just barely make out the exchange going on between Sudō and Kitō over the monitor.

Instigated by the fact that he was struggling against supposed amateurs, Sudō's performance slowly began to lose some of its color.

“Fufu, that was a lie. Kitō-kun is an experienced basketball player.”

Having Kitō incite Sudō like this was most likely also part of Sakayanagi's plan.

“By messing with his mentality like this, Sudō-kun will inevitably collapse. No matter how superior one's technique really is, if the mind is still immature, it will give rise to an opportunity for someone to take advantage of you.”

The student named Kitō seemed to be quite skilled at playing basketball. He intentionally hid his abilities and played at an equal skill level as the students from Class C for the first half of the match. His goal was to stage a comeback once Sudō got on the court and steal the win.

And, if that didn't work, he'd look to win by instigating a fight with Sudō to break his concentration.

It would be fair to say that Sakayanagi's two-part strategy had completely poked a hole in our own.

“My team will be catching up with yours soon enough.”

Kitō cleanly sent the basketball flying straight into the basket. The score was now 17 to 15. Class A was definitely putting the pressure on.

Sudō's mental turmoil had indeed nearly evened out the playing field.

However—

“You said that Sudō’s mind is still immature, but... When exactly did you hear that?”

“What do you mean?”

Sudō had grown up a lot over this past year. Now, his willpower wouldn’t crumble because of something like this. He knew that there was no way that Horikita would care about how cool he was during the match. That would only come for carrying his team to victory.

[Oraa!]

[Nngh!?!]

Although his tone of voice was rough, the smoothness of his play returned. He overtook Kitō and made his way to the basket, and nobody was able to stop him. He finished off his run down the court with a dunk, once again extending the lead for Class C.

[Heh... I got a little bit heated there, but... there’s no way you’re beating me.]

Even though Kitō was a skilled player, with a calm mind, Sudō was easily a step or two above him.

“I see. So he’s done some growing up of his own?”

After that, Sudō’s mind didn’t waver again, and he brilliantly led the team until the end.

Eventually, the sound of the whistle rang out, signifying the end of the match.

[Hell yeah! I did it Suzune!]

Sudō struck a triumphant pose. He looked so excited that you'd think he had just won a basketball tournament.

It was only one win, but his excitement was well deserved given everything he had just accomplished.

“I thought we had a chance, but his skills really were on another level after all.”

Apparently, Sakayanagi had seriously set her sights on picking up the win, with or without Sudō on the court.

The final score was 24 to 16. The first event had come to an end with a splendid victory for Class C.

“Who would've thought that Class C would win first! You never really know when it comes to these things huh?”

Hoshinomiya-sensei mumbled her thoughts to herself, impressed with what had happened.

Though, despite our win, we had conceded one of our strongest assets in return.

It had been an event that literally required our victory from the moment he stepped out onto the court.

Part 2

The time came for them to choose the second event. The result of the drawing was...

『Typing』 Required Participants: 1 ▪ Time: 30 Minutes

Rules: A competition of speed and accuracy over three different formats of typings skills: Vocabulary, Short Passages, and Essays.

Commander Intervention: The commander will be allowed to notify the participant of one mistake they make during the test.

Once again, the event was one of the ones Class C had come up with. It would be a one-on-one competition.

Apparently, the luck of the draw was on our side.

The event had been proposed by The Professor, who, out of everyone in our class, was the most proficient at anything that had to do with computers.

In fact, his typing speed was second to none amongst everyone in Class C. His speed was unquestionably fast, even when compared to the national average. However, that's not to say that everything would go perfectly. The primary reason for this is that we had no way of finding out just how many students were proficient at typing in Class A, and just how skilled at it they really were. We had no choice but to place our faith in The Professor's skills, and his skills alone. That being said, there was still a reason why he was chosen for this project.

“Class C’s gone and chosen another interesting event. Although at first glance it may look like a game, typing is one of the most fundamental skills in the world of information technology. You could even go so far as to call it essential. I suppose it’s only natural that the school would accept it as an event.”

When it comes to academics, Class A was at a major advantage.

Horikita probably wanted to choose skill-based competitions that wouldn’t be influenced by things like that.

“Everyone has one or two things that they’re good at. However, when it comes to competing over such things, it’s hard for anyone to say whether or not they’re absolutely better at them than somebody else. It seems like someone in your class has quite a lot of confidence in their typing skills.”

Generally speaking, most students with special skills who can win in a one-on-one competition also have the potential to succeed in another event, like with how we chose to put Onodera in the basketball match even though she specializes in swimming. On the other hand, by allocating a student like The Professor, who is only good at doing one thing, to the one-on-one match, we would gain an advantage in the events that would come afterward.

I, naturally, chose The Professor... Sotomura Hideo.

Sakayanagi, on the other hand, selected Yoshida Kenta, a student I knew practically nothing about.

For this event, we tried to restrain the commander’s ability to intervene with the event as much as possible.

Our strategy was to let The Professor do his thing without giving Sakayanagi much of a chance to butt in.

The outcome of the event was to be judged by a computer application that had been prepared beforehand by the school.

The results were...

“Class C, Sotomura Hideo: 90 Points. Class A, Yoshida Kenta, 83 Points. Class C wins.”

Once the test was over, Sakagami-sensei announced their scores.

The difference between the two of them was a mere 7 points.

The results were pretty scary to hear given how close it was, but being up by even one point was still a victory.

“While it’s only a bit, it looks like we still fell short. Things really aren’t going to be that simple, are they?”

Class A losing two times in a row had been an unexpected development, but in a way, it had been inevitable.

After all, both of the events had been put forward by Class C, so there wasn’t very much Sakayanagi could’ve done about it.

Part 3

Thus, Class C had won the first two events.

So far, luck had been on our side, and all of Horikita's plans were coming together beautifully.

There were 8 events left for the drawing to choose from. It would've been great if it had kept selecting events that Class C had suggested, but...

『English Test』 Required Participants: 8 ▪ Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: The test will be within the scope of the first-year English curriculum.

Victory will be decided based on the class with the higher overall score.

Commander Intervention: The commander can answer a single question on behalf of one of the participants.

The third event was a written test, something we all knew would be coming sooner or later.

The crux of this special exam was figuring out how to win in the events that the opponent had suggested.

If we managed to win this event, we'd gain an advantage far greater than a mere victory.

Starting with Mii-chan, I came up with a lineup of students who were skilled at English. Although, it was frustrating that I couldn't make use of strong trump cards like Horikita and Keisei yet. Class A had suggested three different written

tests, English, Math, and Modern Literature, so it would be difficult for me to evenly distribute those of us with better academic abilities.

Horikita had outlined two different strategies in the notebooks she had made in case two written test events ended up getting chosen.

The first was to aim for both wins by evenly distributing the capable students between the two events. The second was to deliberately lose one of them and pour our resources into trying to win the other.

Sakayanagi quickly decided on her eight participants, but I took a moment longer to consider my options.

“This is the first time you’ve had to take time to think. It seems that Horikita-san left you with more than one option to choose from.”

There was no guarantee that another test would get chosen later, but there was also no guarantee that we’d be able to win now.

But, the most frustrating part about this was that Class C had a tendency to do worse in English.

In other words, I had to choose between the two strategies. Do I balance the two teams and go for both wins? Or do I simply throw away our chances to win this one?

“Will you give up on the English event? Or... maybe you’ll choose to fight and use up all your strength here?”

Sakayanagi prompted me with a question, struggling to contain her excitement.

However, I was not afraid of losing here.

“I can tell what you’re thinking, Ayanokōji-kun. You’re afraid that we anticipated the fact that you might choose to give up on the English test and, as a result, preserved our better students for the later tests, aren’t you? After all, if we were to compete with a suboptimal team, it would give you a chance at winning. It’s not so easy to give up on this event, now is it?”

After some thought, I made the decision to give up on the English event.

“Based on recent global trends, it seems that girls tend to perform better in a variety of subjects than boys do, and score higher than boys as well. And, as it would turn out, English happens to be one of those subjects. But of course, those are just trends. It’s just a reference for you, if you will.”

Sakayanagi spoke up one last time just as I was about to make my decision on who to include in the event.

She was looking to put pressure on me by feeding me with unnecessary information.

In any case, Class A couldn’t afford to lose in the English test. She would undoubtedly choose several powerful contenders for the event.

Once we had each finished choosing the participants, their names were displayed on the larger monitor.

The eight people listed for Class C were Okiya Kyōsuke, Minami Hakuo, Karuizawa Kei, Satō Maya, Shinohara Satsuki, Inokashira Kokoro, Sonoda Chiyo, and Ichihashi Ruri. They were all students who wouldn’t be needed in any of the events that would show up later on.

The eight people listed for Class A were Satonaka Satoru, Sugio Hiroshi, Tsukaji Shihori, Tanihara Mao, Motodoi Chikako, Fukuyama Shinobu, Rokkaku Momoe, and Nakajima Riko. While they weren't the best options Sakayanagi had available, it was still a fairly solid group. It seemed like she had made use of the trend she had mentioned just a bit earlier, as six of her eight selections were girls.

“It seems like you've chosen to give up on English and focus on the future. An acceptable decision.”

As expected, she had a very good grasp of Class C's academic abilities.

Even though we had the power to intervene for one single question, for the most part, the only thing we could do is sit and watch the event unfold.

At a certain point, we were able to switch between the student's answer sheets in real-time.

Making use of my intervention, I helped one of my classmates answer a question that most of the students seemed to be struggling with.

However, whatever impact this may have had was negligible. At best, it would only improve our score by a handful of points.

After they were done, the school collected their answer sheets and immediately began grading them. Before long, the results were in.

The outcome of the test would be based on the cumulative scores of all eight participants.

“Class C scored a total of 443 points, whereas Class A scored 651. Therefore, Class A wins.”

As expected, the difference between the two scores was overwhelming.

“We only scored an average of about 81%. If you had chosen to go all out instead of giving up, you might have been able to win this one.”

Like Sakayanagi had said, there had indeed been an opportunity for us to take advantage of their low average score, but things just weren’t that simple.

It was probably better to avoid thinking of this as a win that I let get away from me.

Sakayanagi’s courage to hold onto her more capable students without being afraid of losing three events in a row was nothing short of admirable.

Just as Class A was presented with their first win, the selection for the fourth event had begun.

『Math Test』 Required Participants: 7 ▪ Time: 50 Minutes

Rules: The test will be within the scope of the first-year math curriculum. Victory will be decided based on the class with the higher overall score.

Commander Intervention: The commander can answer a single question on behalf of one of the participants.

English test was followed by an additional written test.

“Looks like your choice paid off. You’ll undoubtedly have to go all-out this time. Or... perhaps you plan on waiting for the Modern Literature test?”

In this situation, it was best not to place my bets on the Modern Literature test. Instead, I chose to make use of all of the academic ability Class C had at its disposal.

“I said earlier that girls have a tendency to score higher, but for math, the opposite is true. Apparently, boys tend to do better than girls. Fascinating, isn’t it?”

No matter what ideas she may try to ingrain within me, the choices I would make still wouldn’t change.

I chose Hirata Yōsuke, Yukimura Teruhiko, Ishikura Kayoko, Wang Mei-Yu, Azuma Sana, Kushida Kikyō, and Nishimura Ryūko. It was the strongest seven-man lineup that I could make from Class C. As for our opponents, Class A had chosen Matoba Shinji, Shimazaki Ikkei, Morishige Takurō, Tsukasaki Taiga, Ishida Yūsuke, Yamamura Miki, and Nishikawa Ryōko. It was a lineup of mostly male students of equal, or even higher academic ability than the previous ones she had put forth. This was set to be an all-out competition where we had put forth our strongest contenders, Horikita and Kōenji not included.

Not long after, the math test went underway. Unlike the devastating results of the English test, there were pretty much no mistakes this time, with Yukimura Teruhiko, that is, Keisei, taking the top spot.

Even though I had Nishimura, the one with the lowest overall scores in math, wear the headset, I was only able to help her with one question, so it was difficult to imagine that this would have a significant impact on the results of the test. Considering the fact that Sakayanagi would undoubtedly be able to do the same,

having the commanders intervene successfully was pretty much just a basic requirement of the test.

After the written test finished, the teachers immediately began grading the answer sheets.

Given that this was an event that Class A had proposed, if we managed to win, our overall chances would rise exponentially.

We'd be able to challenge the fifth event with the possibility of taking home the entire special exam.

“Well then, I will now be announcing the results of the Math Test event. Class C: 631 points.”

Our average score for each student was around 90%, a very impressive result.

However, if the questions on the test weren't very difficult, there would be other things to worry about.

“And for Class A... 655 points. Class A wins.”

Sakagami-sensei reported the two cumulative scores, revealing that we had lost the event by a slim, narrow margin of just 24 points.

“That was dangerously close. Everyone in Class C must have studied quite a lot. If you had chosen Horikita-san and Kōenji-kun, you might have won, don't you think?”

“...Maybe so.”

It was regrettable that we hadn't been able to steal the win this time. If I had included both Horikita and Kōenji, it's true that we might have won. But even so, it still wouldn't have been a guarantee either.

Furthermore, we were now facing the reality that, if the Modern Literature Test were to be drawn next, we would pretty much just lose automatically.

Class C simply didn't have anyone left whose academic abilities would be good enough to surpass those of Class A.

With this, the lead we had was gone. The score had once again evened out at two wins and two losses.

Part 4

And so began the drawing for the fifth event.

『Flash Mental Arithmetic』 Required Participants: 2 ▪ Time: 30 Minutes

Rules: Victory will be decided by the student who takes first place in terms of both speed and accuracy using abacus-style mental arithmetic.

Commander Intervention: The commander can change the answer to a single question of their choice.

It was the third event in a row that had been proposed by Class A.

Normally, this would be an unfavorable turn of events for us, but this particular event was a special exception to that. Keisei was probably feeling elated right about now. After all, this was the event that Katsuragi had promised to ease up on.

However, it was still too early to celebrate. If Katsuragi doesn't get chosen, our fleeting fantasies of winning would disappear.

“Another one of our events. We absolutely can't afford to lose this one.”

Disregarding Sakayanagi's chatter, I went with the strategy Horikita had come up with, selecting Kōenji Rokusuke and Matsushita Chiaki to participate.

Between the two of them, I had Matsushita wear the headset. Even if I had Kōenji wear it, there was no reason to believe that he was going to listen to me anyway.

Horikita's decision to assign Kōenji to participate in the Flash Mental Arithmetic event was probably the correct one. Instead of being based on whichever class

had a higher overall score, the win would be given to the class of the student who placed first. There was a chance that Kōenji might meet our expectations and pick up the win. But, just in case he didn't take the event seriously, Matsushita would at least be there as a backup. Matsushita has a quick mind for math, so the plan had always been to use her in the Math Test or Flash Mental Arithmetic events. Even if we had used Matsushita in the math exam, it still didn't mean that we would've won, so you could say that the fact that we could still make use of her had been a blessing in disguise.

The students Sakayanagi chose were Katsuragi Kōhei and Tamiya Emi.

According to the information Katsuragi had leaked to us, Tamiya's abilities weren't all that impressive.

As proof, Katsuragi was the one wearing the headset for Class A.

“There will be ten questions in total. Although the questions will progressively get more difficult, the points awarded for getting them correct will rise as well. In the event of a tie for first place, the event will be extended until one party gets a question wrong.”

Moving forward, the numbers for each of the questions would be displayed on the monitor in the audiovisual room.

Since the commander could only intervene with one single question, we would most likely wait to do so until the end.

Even though the event was just about to begin, Kōenji folded his arms in front of him and closed his eyes.

“...So it backfired, huh?”

His attitude hadn't even slightly changed from back when the special exam first began.

For the first question, different single-digit numbers would flash upon the screen three times over the course of five seconds. It was a question of level 10 difficulty, the lowest level.

6. 9. 1. The answer was 16.

This first question was a problem that anyone would be able to solve. After the numbers disappeared, the students were prompted to write down their answers.

Matsushita answered correctly without putting in much effort, but Kōenji had left his answer sheet blank. It made sense though, considering the fact that he hadn't even bothered to look as the numbers were being displayed on the screen.

At this point, it seemed like we had no choice but to rely on Katsuragi making a mistake like he had promised.

“Fufu. He really is such a peculiar person.”

Even though Sakayanagi couldn't see what he had responded with, she could tell just from looking at him that he hadn't responded with anything.

“However, since Matsushita-san seems to be the one you're banking on, there aren't really any problems, are there?”

As Sakayanagi spoke, the event continued playing out before us.

By the time they got to the third and fourth questions, the number of digits had increased to two and the number of rounds had gone up to six.

Matsushita was unfazed by this and still answered each question correctly.

However, as they approached the fifth problem, the overall difficulty increased yet again.

Question five was 3 digit numbers in 6 rounds over 5 seconds, and question six had even more with 3 digit numbers in 8 rounds over 5 seconds.

Matsushita was at her wit's end as she tried to calculate the numbers inside her head.

The answers she had managed to squeeze out had been correct up until the sixth question where she was just barely able to keep up.

But, that was as far as she could go. The next question, question seven, had 3 digit numbers in 12 rounds over 4.5 seconds. Question eight had 3 digit numbers in 15 rounds over 3.5 seconds.

By the time they had gotten to the ninth question, it was 3 digit numbers in 15 rounds over 2.5 seconds.

“T-this is like, waaay impossible!”

Just like the students, Hoshinomiya-sensei was understandably also at her wit's end upon seeing the questions the students were getting.

“The difficulty level may be a bit too high...”

Sakagami-sensei agreed, not knowing the answer either.

Even though Matsushita's answers had been correct up to the sixth question, from the seventh question onward, they, unfortunately, were not. What's more, Kōenji still hadn't given an answer to a single question. At this point, even if he

managed to answer the last question correctly, he had already gone past the point of no return.

Naturally, I had already memorized the answers to all nine questions, and Sakayanagi had probably done the same.

The commander was only allowed to change the participant's answer to one of the questions. So the plan was that, If I couldn't solve the tenth question, I'd go with the ninth. And if I couldn't solve the ninth, I'd go with the eighth.

The extent to which Katsuragi decided to throw for us would greatly influence the outcome of the event.

The tenth and final question in the Flash Mental Arithmetic event began.

It consisted of 3 digit numbers in 15 rounds over 1.6 seconds.

One by one, the 15 numbers flashed on and off of the screen in quick, rapid succession.

For a moment, everything fell silent.

Whether it be Katsuragi, Matsushita, or Tamiya, none of them even managed to pick up their pen. They all just sat there in mute amazement at the question that had just passed them by.

Sakayanagi signaled to the teachers that she wanted to make use of her intervention, and, of course, I did the same.

“Eh...? Well then, would the commanders please provide an answer for one question. Remember: the later the question, the higher the score.”

Naturally, the question I answered was the last one, question ten.

Matsushita obediently complied with my instructions and wrote down the answer I provided her with.

She herself didn't know the answer, so she didn't have any reason to turn down the one I had given her.

[Fufufu. Flash Mental Arithmetic is quite an interesting game. I've never tried it before.]

Kōenji, the man who Sakayanagi and I had already stopped paying attention to, had apparently opened his eyes again at some point.

With an amused smile, Kōenji cast a glance at the surveillance camera we had been watching the event through.

“Which question did you provide an answer for, Ayanokōji-kun? I chose the tenth with an answer of 7619.”

The answer I had given Matsushita was...

“I did as well.”

Apparently, Sakayanagi had managed to solve the last question as well.

“In terms of commander intervention, it seems we were evenly matched. In other words, this has come down to a face-off between Katsuragi-kun and Matsushita-san.”

As the teachers collected everyone's answer sheets, the man who hadn't responded to a single question once again opened his mouth.

[The answer for the last question was 7619, yes?]

“My my my— how surprising. He’s correct.”

Overhearing Kōenji’s answer, Sakayanagi applauded, praising him for a job well done.

The teachers hurriedly began tallying up the scores.

If Katsuragi had gotten the seventh, eighth, or ninth question correct, Class C would lose.

But on the other hand, if he had gotten less than six questions correct, we would win instead.

“After tallying up the results, with eight out of ten questions correct, first place goes to Katsuragi Kōhei. Class A wins.”

We had wanted to gain the upper hand by winning the fifth event, but victory smiled upon Katsuragi instead.

Sakagami-sensei’s announcement marked the end of the fifth event.

“It’s quite regrettable, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Was trying to persuade Katsuragi a mistake?”

“It was certainly safe to assume that he holds a grudge against me. It wasn’t wrong to try and take advantage of it either. But, did you really think I’d overlook a weakness like that so easily?”

Even though I couldn’t see Sakayanagi, I knew that she was smiling.

“I told him beforehand. That, if he were to betray me, I’d expel more of the earnest, hardworking students in our class. Despite how he looks, he cares quite

a lot about his friends. He's not the type of person who would sacrifice those around him because of some selfish grudge."

Sakayanagi had known him for much longer than I had.

She was very familiar with his strengths and weaknesses.

"Facing defeat after you thought you would win. This must have been quite a large blow to your morale. Are you worried about the final events?"

"Who knows."

"Katsuragi-kun wasn't on your side, but that's not the only thing that went wrong for you, now is it? If Kōenji-kun had taken the event seriously from the beginning, it's possible that he could've gotten a perfect score. That is, you could've been able to win the match, no?"

"That's just speculation. Having power you can't control is the same thing as not having power at all."

Just like how students who lack special skills, academic ability, or physical prowess couldn't be counted on, students who weren't willing to take things seriously couldn't be either. Even though they seem different on the surface, they were the same. At least, that's how it was for this exam.

Of course, our inability to persuade Kōenji to take action was a problem on our side of things as well.

With this, the score was two wins and three losses. Class C was standing at the edge of a cliff.

“Only two more events left and the special exam will be over. It’s really such a shame.”

I could hear Sakayanagi let out a sigh, wanting to enjoy the moment for as long as possible.

“Now that it’s come to this, wins, losses, all of it feels trivial.”

“If that’s the case, then it’d be great if you’d let us win.”

“I’m afraid I cannot do that. This is a serious competition, after all.”

As Sakagami-sensei moved forward with the exam, the drawing for the sixth event began.

At this point, if it drew another event suggested by Class A, we would definitely lose.

8

Class B Vs. Class D

While Class A and Class C were still in the process of having their Math tests graded for their third event...

The outcome of the fourth event in the battle between Class B and Class D had already been decided.

“After tallying up the results, Class B ended with 601 points, while Class D ended with 409 points. Class B wins the fourth event.”

After hearing Mashima announce the results, Ichinose let out a sigh of relief.

The event had been an academic test that Class B had suggested, so it would’ve been nearly impossible for them to lose.

“Well ain’t you a lucky one, Ichinose. You should be grateful we keep drawing Class B’s events.”

“...Yeah.”

Despite having won, Ichinose was still clearly distraught, whereas the loser, Ryūen, seemed perfectly composed.

Moreover, this was only natural. Out of the four events that had been drawn so far, three of them had been suggested by Class B. However, those four events hadn’t ended up playing out as expected, as the score was tied with two wins apiece between Class B and Class D. During the third event, Class B had lost at

their own game, the Chemistry Test. Furthermore, the reason for their defeat was obvious.

“Sensei... Have the students with stomach aches come back from the bathroom yet?”

At Ichinose’s request, Mashima got in touch with the classroom to check on the situation in Class B.

“No, two of them still haven’t gotten back from the bathroom yet, and it seems that several of the others have also started to feel unwell now.”

“Is that so...”

The reason why Class B had lost the Chemistry event was because a portion of their main fighting force had unexpectedly fallen sick.

But, that wasn’t the only reason. On the day before the exam, some of Class B’s students had gotten into a dispute with Class D, which had also had an impact.

Although a complaint had been made to the school, neither of the two classes had been penalized as it was nothing more than a verbal argument.

These underhanded actions had undoubtedly been orchestrated by the man seated on the other side of the table, Ryūen.

Ichinose took a few deep breaths in order to compose herself once again.

“Haa... It’s okay, it’s okay.”

They hadn’t given up the lead just yet. Ichinose had lost her presence of mind ever since her defeat in the Chemistry event, but now she was slowly beginning to return to normal. While it was true that problems kept popping up one after

another, Ryūen's actions were limited. As the commander, he wouldn't be able to do anything that she couldn't do also.

Ichinose desperately tried to regain her confidence. To tell herself that, as long as she continued to fight hard, they wouldn't lose.

“Oi, you teachers. Hurry up and start the fifth event already. Those chumps in Class B weren't even able to take care of their health on the day of the exam. Are you really gonna make concessions for a naive bunch like that?”

“Mind your language, Ryūen.”

Despite Chabashira's warning for his arrogant language, Ryūen didn't seem to care.

In fact, he even turned it up a notch.

“I dunno if they're on the toilet or whatever, but they could totally be using this time to iron out their strategy. Plus, it's strange that multiple people just so happened to get sick all at the same time. What kind of sinister tricks are you playing at, Ichinose?”

“I-I didn't...”

Ryūen drew suspicion to the fact that several people had reported feeling unwell at the same time.

Even though Ichinose knew that there had been absolutely no wrongdoing on her part, she had no room to refute it either.

“Either way, let's just get on with it already, aight teach'?”

With a grin on his face, Ryūen shot a look at Chabashira for confirmation.

“Ryūen is certainly right about that. Mashima-sensei, please proceed with the fifth event, if you would.”

Mashima began the drawing for the fifth event.

『Karate』 Required Participants: 3 ▪ Time: 10 Minutes

Rules: Each match will take at most 3 minutes, using a non-contact, Sundome Karate ruleset. The matches will adopt a “Loser Leaves, Winner Stays” tournament style.

Commander Intervention: The commander may, at any point, call for one of the matches to be redone.

“Sweet, it’s one of our events this time. We’ll take on anyone, doesn’t matter who.”

Ryūen chose Suzuki Hidetoshi, Oda Takumi, and Ishizaki Daichi for his three participants. The rules regarding commander intervention were perfect for him as well, granting him the ability to call for a rematch just in case something unexpected were to happen and they lost one of the matches.

On the other side, Ichinose chose Sumida Makoto, Watanabe Norihito, and Yonezu Haruto. Back when the opposing class’s events were announced, she had tasked these three with practicing for the Karate event, but they pretty much had their hands full with just remembering the rules.

As a result, Class B suffered two staggering back-to-back losses. Even when Ichinose tried to make use of her powers as the commander to call for a rematch, it still didn't manage to change anything.

The fifth event had been one of the quickest and most decisive losses so far.

At this point, Class B didn't have any more leeway. If they lost the next event, the sixth, they would lose the entire special exam.

"It's funny, isn't it, Ichinose?"

As they waited for the drawing to pass judgment, Ryūen called out to Ichinose, who had gotten quieter.

"When it was decided that you'd be going against Class D back when the special exam was announced, I'll bet you guys felt like you had an absolute advantage. But looking at you now, it's like the only thing you can do is sit there and pray to the heavens. Kuku."

Ichinose's strategies were by no means naive.

If they were competing under normal circumstances, Class B would be at 3 wins and 2 losses right now.

But instead, a sudden accident happened that had thrown everything out of order.

If they didn't draw one of their own events here, they wouldn't stand a chance.

And then it was chosen, the sixth event.

『Judo』 Required Participants: 1 ▪ Match Time: 4 Minutes (Up to 3 Matches for 12 Minutes Total)

Rules: Standard judo rules apply.

Commander Intervention: The commander may choose to invalidate the results of one match and call for a rematch.

A one-on-one event. For Class B, the event that had been chosen was the worst possible outcome imaginable.

This was the first time Ichinose had ever truly felt the sensation of being plunged into darkness.

“Kukuku. Judo? Judo, eh? For THAT to get chosen out of all things. Lady luck ain’t smiling down on you, Ichinose.”

“How...”

“If the last two events had been from Class B, you wouldda still had a chance at winning!”

Ryūen locked in Yamada Albert without hesitation.

Just like in the Karate event earlier, the rules regarding commander intervention were an ultimate insurance policy that practically guaranteed that he wouldn’t lose.

“Even though your opponent is Albert, don’t let it get to you. The strongest guy doesn’t always win, so ya never know until ya give it a shot.”

The result was already as clear as day. It would be extremely difficult for Class B to beat an opponent whose physique and skill far surpassed their own.

It was the only event that Class B had given up on, where they wouldn’t be able to win no matter what. Ichinose had to select a single person, and she was only

given thirty seconds to decide who that would be. But now, Ichinose couldn't even make the choice to nominate someone anymore.

The seconds ticked away mercilessly until the timer finally reached 0. As per the rules, a student would be chosen at random if the commander failed to make the choice in time, but after considering the danger of the event, Mashima passed the ruling immediately instead.

“Class B loses this event by default. And, this marks the fourth win for Class D, making Class D the overall victor for this special exam.”

At Mashima's merciful declaration, the outcome of the battle between Class B and Class D had been set in stone.

Part 1

From here, the story turns back to the day the special exam was first announced.

Alone, Ishizaki chased after Ryūen as he headed off to eat his lunch. Class D had already decided on making Kaneda their commander, but they were having problems coming up with what events to choose.

The reason being that nobody in Class D was capable of coming up with any original ideas.

Ordinary events, ordinary rules, ordinary fighting styles.

They were only able to come up with simple, ordinary ideas that anyone would be able to think of.

If they couldn't come up with anything better, their chances of winning against any of the other classes were effectively non-existent.

Submitting ten casual, ordinary events was simply the easy way out.

In Class D, the current opinion was that they should avoid facing off against Class A because their abilities were just too overpowering. Similarly, they came to the conclusion that it might be even more crucial to avoid Class B.

So, naturally, everyone wanted to go after the up-and-coming Class C. That is, everyone other than Ishizaki.

“Uhh— could ya spare a moment, Ryūen-san?”

Despite his fear of doing so, Ishizaki checked his surroundings to make sure that there were no other first-year students around before he proceeded to call out to Ryūen.

“Hm?”

With just a mere glance from Ryūen’s harsh eyes, Ishizaki froze like a frog that had been seen by a snake.

But despite his body freezing up on him, his mouth still managed to speak.

“I beg of you— please give me some of your time!!”

“Oh, so you’ve gotten big enough to oppose me now, huh?”

“N-no, that ain’t it...!”

“Kuku. Well, whatever. You’re practically the leader of Class D right now.”

Ryūen felt like he was only prolonging the inevitable right now. That this was nothing more than extra time at a school where he was going to get forced out eventually, so he had plenty of time to kill. The two of them began walking outside with Ryūen in the lead.

Even if someone were to witness the two of them, it’d probably seem like Ishizaki had called Ryūen out or something.

Once they made their way out of the school building and got to an area where no people were around, Ishizaki promptly got down on his knees.

“Ryūen-san, please... lend your strength to Class D for this special exam!”

From the moment Ishizaki called out to him, Ryūen had a solid idea of what Ishizaki wanted. However, he didn't say a word about it. He just looked down upon Ishizaki prostrated on the ground before him.

"You're dribbling out nonsense, Ishizaki. I stepped down. I've told you that already. You really think I'll help you?"

"That—I know that. But with how we are now, we hardly stand a chance against the other classes!"

"Yeah probably."

Ryūen didn't deny it either.

After all, he had already thought about it. When it comes to sheer competitive potential, Class D was overwhelmingly inferior to the other classes.

"Kaneda stepped up as the commander, so even if we lose nobody will get expelled... But, if we lose at this point, our class points will be all but gone!"

"Well, that's what you get if ya lose seven events straight, eh?"

Class D currently has 318 class points. If they lost all seven matches, they'd be down to 100 points total. While that was the worst-case scenario, it wasn't all that unlikely given the current trajectory of the class.

"So you want me to be the commander? Who would agree to something like that?"

"That's—"

In order to get Ryūen expelled, they'd have to make him the commander. And furthermore, they would need to lose.

However, the class would have to suffer a huge loss just to get one person expelled, and nobody was very eager to make that tradeoff.

Should their class points ever drop to 0, it'd be effectively impossible for them to ever reach Class A.

Not only that. It'd be nearly impossible to live a stable life at this school anymore.

Class D's optimal outcome was victory. Second to this would be to lose and force Ryūen's expulsion.

But no matter what, they had to avoid getting crushed and losing their only protection point at the same time.

Ishizaki wanted Class D to win, but he also didn't want Ryūen to get expelled.

And, if anyone in the class could make that happen, it'd be Ryūen himself.

“...So what should we do? Should we go for Class C after all?”

Under normal circumstances, Ishizaki would've been fully behind choosing Class C, but the problem with that was Ayanokōji.

Ishizaki's hesitation stemmed from the fact that he was one of the few students who knew the true nature of that man.

“Don't go asking for my opinion all willy-nilly like that. Who told you I'd cooperate?”

For Ishizaki, this was all or nothing, but Ryūen's words made it clear he had been too reckless. But even so, he still wasn't going to stop prostrating himself. He was prepared to keep it up until the moment Ryūen left.

“You’re right that Class C isn’t very unified. They’ve got a monster like Ayanokōji, but in the end, he’s just one guy. You might even be tempted to think you’d stand a chance because it’s a team competition... though, you’d be wrong.”

“Wha?”

Ryūen, the very man Ishizaki thought he had no chance of convincing, unexpectedly decided to share his thoughts.

“Put me as the commander and I’d avoid facing off with Class C. I dunno the whole process of how we choose our opponent, but that class isn’t one I’d want to be challenging voluntarily.”

“B-but other than Ayanokōji—”

“That’s got nothing to do with it, blockhead.”

Ishizaki recoiled a bit.

“Even though Class D is full of incompetent morons like you, we’ve still got the tools to succeed in other ways. But, Class C isn’t the best option we’ve got available. No, there’s only one class suitable enough to be our opponent.”

“Wh-which one is it!?”

“Class B.”

Ryūen spoke the name of the class without even looking at Ishizaki below him.

“If you’re lookin’ to win this exam, Class B is your only option.”

He proposed Class B, a class that everyone in Class D had wanted to avoid.

“Even an idiot can be useful depending on what ya do with ‘em.”

With that, Ryūen turned his back on Ishizaki and began to leave.

“P-please wait! How, how could we possibly beat Class B!?”

Ishizaki scrambled to his feet and called after him.

“Ryūen-san! Ryūen-saaaan!”

But Ishizaki’s cries didn’t stop him from walking away.

Part 2

As the one accredited with overthrowing Ryūen, Ishizaki's influence within Class D wasn't exactly low.

However, that didn't mean that there weren't any problems.

The one who should've been expelled during the provisional exam, Ryūen, was still here. The class had focused their censure votes on Manabe in order to threaten her a little, but she ended up being expelled instead. Naturally, many students felt suspicious of this.

Of course, the first question in everyone's mind was: 'Who exactly was it that cast such a large number of praise votes for Ryūen?'

Had someone within Class D voted for him? Or, if it was another class, which one?

A lot of theories were repeatedly being tossed around as Class D tried to reason out what had happened.

Due to the high degree of anonymity of the provisional special exam, it had been impossible for them to figure out the exact answer.

In reality, Class B's Ichinose had indirectly struck a deal with Ryūen, offering a large number of praise votes in exchange for Ryūen's stockpile of private points. While that was what had happened, Class B would never tell that to anyone. As Ichinose had asked to keep it a secret, her classmates obediently followed suit. Class B would've listened to her either way, but in this case, it had been part of

a strategy to prevent one of their classmates from being expelled, so everyone was eager to comply with her.

Meanwhile, Class D was enveloped in paranoia.

However, a few of them knew the truth. Ishizaki and Ibuki had taken action in order to prevent Ryūen's expulsion, and Shiina Hiyori had collaborated with them.

Given that it wouldn't be strange if everything came to a standstill at this point, Shiina played the very important role of making use of the advice that Ishizaki had received from Ryūen.

She worked diligently to ensure that her class would be matched against Class B.

In a private conversation with Kaneda, she subtly guided him to come to the conclusion that Class B was their best choice.

However, that didn't mean the problem had been resolved.

Shiina herself was well aware that, without any leadership, Class D's chances of winning would be as thin as paper if they were to face off against Class B right now. She knew that falling behind, even slightly, would lead to defeat.

So that very same day, after the class matchups had been decided, Shiina immediately put a certain plan into action.

"Dammit. What should we do...?"

Inside a rented room at the Karaoke parlor, Ishizaki vented his frustration.

"Dunno. Why exactly did you call me here again? What kinda group is this?"

Ibuki glared at Ishizaki before proceeding to give Shiina a similarly harsh look, who was seated right beside him.

“How shall we put it... This is Ishizaki-kun and his merry band of friends?”

Ibuki slouched down in her seat as she glared at Shiina for her silly answer.

“Haa... My head hurts.”

“As the three people who best understand the current situation, I think we’ll be able to come up with some ideas by gathering up like this. Manjushri speaks to three, as they say.”

“Man Juice speaks to Thee? Heh. What’s that about?”

“You said that on purpose didn’t you?”

“Ouch! Ibuki, you bitch! Stop pinching the skin on the back of my hand like that!”

“Nice and lively. I knew meeting up in a karaoke room would be a good decision.”

Upon seeing the interaction between Ibuki and Ishizaki, Shiina clasped her hands together happily. Ibuki, however, was having none of it.

“We can’t have a decent discussion with a group like this. I’m outta here.”

“Ah, that would be problematic. Ryūen-kun is going to show up after this.”

““What?””

Ishizaki and Ibuki both spoke the same thing at the same exact time.

“Ryūen-kun is absolutely essential to winning this special exam. After all, he’s the only one who saw potential in facing Class B when everyone else wanted to avoid them.”

Shiina had set off one hell of an unexpected bomb.

She didn’t seem to understand the sheer weight of her own words.

“You, what did you just say?”

“Eh? I said that he’s the only one who sa—”

“Not that. What you said before. Who’d you say would be showing up here?”

“Ryūen-kun.”

Ibuki looked at Ishizaki. Ishizaki looked at Ibuki.

“S-seriously? Ryūen-san? Here???”

“Yes. I’ve already invited him.”

“This is going to be one of the worst karaoke meetups I’ve ever seen... but, did you tell him about us?”

“I told him you’d both be here, of course.”

“Yer tellin’ me that he knows we’re here and he’s still gonna come...?”

Ishizaki had already attempted to get Ryūen to cooperate and got turned down, so it was only natural that he’d be suspicious.

“I’ll ask just to make sure, but what time did that guy say he’d get here?”

“4 o’clock.”

“...Huh?”

Ibuki took a look at the clock on the wall.

The time was just past 5:05 PM.

“It looks like he’s just a tiny bit late.”

“It’s been more than half an hour! That’s not called being late! That’s called being ignored!”

“Calm down and help yourself to some of this melon soda. Let’s just be patient, shall we?”

Ibuki completely disregarded the can of melon soda Shiina offered her.

“I don’t have the time for this...”

As Ibuki was about to get up, Ishizaki stopped her.

“I’m gonna wait. Ryūen-san will definitely come... maybe...”

“Are you retarded? No way in hell that guy’s gonna keep his word.”

In fact, he was already substantially late. Unwilling to get involved in this, Ibuki spat out a superficial apology and began to walk for the door.

But this time, a slender, white hand reached out and grabbed Ibuki by the arm.

“Let’s wait, Ibuki-san. He may not seem like it, but Ryūen-kun is an earnest person, wouldn’t you agree?”

“...You... What do you know about him?”

“I don’t know very much. Honestly, I’ve only ever spoken to him a few times.”

“Then why?”

“I’ve just got a feeling that he is.”

“So it’s baseless. How sweet.”

“You could say that.”

Shiina responded with a pure, harmless smile that Ibuki found herself getting caught up in.

“Besides, I’m having tons of fun spending time with you two. Won’t you stay?”

“...Idiot.”

Ibuki sat back down, exasperated.

“If he doesn’t show up soon, I’m out of here, alright?”

“Alright~”

Part 3

“I can’t take it anymore! I’m at my limit!”

Although Ibuki had been more than patient, the time was now just past 8 PM.

She was beyond irritated. The word ‘late’ hardly even applied anymore; This could only be described as being stood up.

“Oho. You say that, but haven’t you only sung like 10 songs?”

“You still haven’t hit your limit yet, Ibuki-san!”

“I went past my limit a long time ago! I’m sick of this!”

“Then let’s do our best to try and surpass your limits altogether!”

“I’m not joking around here!”

“Jeeze, yer pissy... Aren’t you tired of being angry all the time?”

“One look at your ugly mug would make anyone a million percent more tired.”

Ishizaki reached out to try and stop Ibuki, but she shook him off and began to leave.

However, just as she reached for the door handle, the door opened all on its own.

“The hell? Did you guys seriously wait here thinking I’d show up eventually?”

A man, Ryūen, entered the room with a grin on his face. As if by impulse, Ishizaki and Ibuki froze up entirely.

They never thought that he’d actually come.

“You’re late, Ryūen-kun.”

“You say that, but it looks like you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Yes. I’ve never been to karaoke before. I’m having a great time.”

“Then I’ll get out of your hair. Make sure you enjoy yourself, Ibuki. Sorry for bothering you all.”

Ryūen sneered as he tried to close the door behind him, but Ibuki stopped him.

“I’ll kick your ass if you leave me here in karaoke hell any longer.”

“Kuku. How scary.”

Ryūen was then pulled into the room by Ibuki and had Ishizaki order him some sparkling water.

Then, he sat down and began to play with his phone without saying anything.

“...So?”

Ibuki questioned him, urging him to speak.

“So? What do you mean?”

“You kept us waiting for this long and you’re not even gonna say anything?”

“I just came by to see if you guys were still wasting your time waiting here for me.”

He took a sip of the sparkling water Ishizaki had ordered for him.

“That’s all there is to it.”

“Shiina’s forced me to stay here for hours now. I’ve run out of patience.”

“Ain’t my fault.”

“Of course it is!”

Pounding her fists on the table, Ibuki scowled at Ryūen.

“O-oi, calm down Ibuki. Snapping at Ryūen-san won’t do ya any good.”

“For crying out loud, how long are you gonna just sit there and wag your tail for him?”

“How long? I... I’ve already decided to follow Ryūen-san.”

“You shameless mutt. You hated being his lackey at first.”

“D-don’t go saying unnecessary shit like that!”

While the two of them were busy going at each other, Shiina was focused on selecting a new song.

“We ended up throwing away our right to choose our opponent because this idiot got caught up in your smooth talk.”

“Sure seems like it.”

Ishizaki curled back. If they had gone with the class consensus, they would’ve chosen Class C. It was the one class they thought they’d have a chance of defeating.

However, Ishizaki’s actions had changed things, and they didn’t have the slightest clue about how they would win.

“This buffoon listens to anything that comes out of your mouth. That means you’re also partially responsible for saying it.”

“Kuku, I can’t blame ya. I said something stupid too.”

With a smile, Ryūen began to open up.

“Do you remember what I did to Class B back at the start of the year?”

“...If I recall correctly, you tried to get them to split up, yes?”

At Ryūen’s instruction, he had started a dispute with Class B where he tried to get them to have a falling out.

To check the potential of each class, he had intentionally sparked a fire.

It had happened around the time back when Sudō had gotten into a brawl and when he had secretly made contact with Katsuragi.

“Remember what the result was?”

“It didn’t have any effect. Class B became very unified quite quickly. Right?”

“Yep. Those guys’ve got more cohesion and unity than any other class.”

“Isn’t that why we should’ve avoided going up against Class B in a team competition like this?”

“I agree with Ibuki. It’ll be difficult to go against Ichinose and her army of admirers.”

Ibuki and Ishizaki both shared the collective opinion of Class D.

“Shiina, what’s your take on Class B?”

“Let’s see... As Ibuki-san and Ishizaki-kun have said, Class B is indeed strong. All of their abilities are above average as well. It’s quite enviable that they are so very harmonious with one another, but... you could say that’s all they really

have going for them. They have no particular threats, they're just a close-knit class."

After Shiina finished giving her analysis, Ibuki quietly commented.

"You've got such a gentle face, but your words are almost heartless."

After hearing everyone's opinions, Ryūen gave his own evaluation of Class B.

"If you ask me, their biggest flaw is Ichinose... Scratch that, it's their lack of a leader."

"H-hold up. I don't understand what you mean. Ichinose is their leader, isn't she?"

"Between Ichinose and Kanzaki, neither of them are natural-born leaders. They're the type of people who're better suited to support a leader. Instead of placing someone like her in charge, they'd be way better off with people like Suzune or Katsuragi. This is the reason why our rotten Class D stands a chance at winning."

"But the fact that it's an incompatible matchup still hasn't changed, right? Class D is below average at almost everything, so in that sense, you could even say that they're the worst possible opponent for us right now."

"I'd say we've got pretty low chances no matter who we fight against."

"...D-do we really suck that much?"

While Ishizaki was completely stunned, neither Ryūen nor Shiina were very affected by his reaction.

"But—"

Ryūen picked up his empty glass of sparkling water and looked at Ibuki and the others through it.

“With a bit of trickery, our low chances’ll be closer to 50%. And depending on the situation, it might shoot up even higher than that.”

Ryūen took out a sheet of folded paper and handed it over to Shiina.

Written on it were the names of ten different events, five of which had been marked as favorites for the events they’d actually be choosing.

As Shiina read through it, Ibuki and Ishizaki both leaned in from the side to take a peek as well.

“When the day comes, we’ll smash this exam.”

“Wait a second, these are all-”

“That’s right. Those events are all based entirely around forcing your opponents to surrender through brute force.”

Ten physically demanding events, including Karate, Judo, Taekwondo, Kendo, and Wrestling.

“Hold on. It’s true that, uh, there are several people in our class who can hold their own like me, Albert, Komiya, and Kondō. Ibuki too... but some of the others can’t.”

Ishizaki was saying that, even if the stronger students could pick up the win in one or two events, there was no way of telling how the rest of the events would play out.

“Yeah. Class B’s got plenty of athletic people of their own. It’d be different if we could get them to compete one-on-one, but doesn’t the rule involving the required number of participants kinda get in the way of that?”

Ibuki shared Ishizaki’s uncertainty. Even if they were to leave everything to the luck of the draw, there was no guarantee that they’d win all of them. However, Ryūen responded flatly.

“So what?”

“Eh?”

“Don’t get so caught up with shit like participant numbers. It doesn’t matter.”

While Ishizaki was having a hard time trying to grasp Ryūen’s intentions, Shiina caught on immediately.

“I see, so that’s how we should look at it? It doesn’t matter how many participants an event might have, it all depends on the rules. If we make use of tournament-style knock-out rules, we can win with only one person.”

“Exactly. Let’s say we did a ten-on-ten Judo event. Just having Albert would be more than enough.”

“But... would the school even allow that? Tournament-style knock-out rules?”

“It’d prolly be impossible to use knock-out rules in a written test or some sort of ball game. But in sports like Karate and Judo, tournament-style rulesets are fairly standard. They wouldn’t be able to say they’re unacceptable. For events like Karate, it should be fine as long as we use the non-contact Sundome ruleset in order to tone down the danger. Even if the school rejects one or two of ‘em for

being too dangerous, it should be fine if we can somehow get at least five through the process.”

“We can do it! With this, we can really do it Ryūen-san!”

Having finally put together all the pieces, a glimmer of hope flashed across Ishizaki’s eyes. However, Ibuki still had her doubts.

“With this, it’s true that we’ll be able to win our own events, but... what if we don’t get lucky? What if more of Class B’s events end up getting drawn?”

“There’s a 50% chance, can’t you just be happy with that?”

“...If I’m gonna cooperate with you, I’m gonna have to demand that you secure the win.”

“Kuku, of course. I’ve got a plan.”

Based on raw ability, Class D was in no position to even think about winning the events Class B would propose right now.

Ryūen was saying that they needed to come up with another method to shorten the gap.

“—What do you want us to do?”

Little by little, Ibuki began to understand the situation.

“Sin to win.”

Ryūen smiled.

“You’ll be picking on some of those Class B guys day in and day out from now until the exam. At first, all you’ve gotta do is follow ‘em around. They’ll notice what we’re doing sooner or later.”

“The heck? You really saying something tiny like that is gonna stress them out?”

“Class B is probably gonna laugh at us, calling our actions childish. As long as we don’t actually do them any harm, they’ll just choose to drop it. That’s the type of person Ichinose is. In the end, she won’t even notice what we’re doing.”

“...What we’re doing?”

“Either way, that’s just the plan for the first week. Once their ten events get announced, we’ll start cranking up the heat. Any petty little thing’ll do. Taking their seats in the cafeteria, glaring ‘em down, accusing them of being loud. Anything goes, really, just don’t go overboard. You guys know the perfect people to do this, right?”

Ryūen was saying that they should include the people who can hold their own in fights like Ishizaki.

“Does... Does that mean you want me to get into fights with them?”

“Our goal is just to interact with them more. Don’t even think of threatening or fighting them at this point. We’ll save that as a trump card we can pull on them at the very end.”

It was necessary to keep everything they did as vague and abstract as possible.

If they went about creating a bunch of one-sided problems, there’d be no way of preventing the school from intervening.

“The most important part of all of this is information. Throughout all our interactions with ‘em, we’ll steal their intel and get a head start on figuring out which events they’re gonna choose on exam day. It’s natural that they’ll come to some sort of consensus on their 5 events from pretty early on. Then some dumbass’ll discuss these events over email or group chat. It’s the same kinda shit you guys’ll be doing in Class D, right?”

“Y-yes. We’ve also tried to find a good time to discuss which events we’d be going with.”

“There you go. Even if their lips are sealed, their phones will be left defenseless. After all, they probably think there’s no way somebody would snoop through them without permission. And, their policy will become more solidified as the exam approaches. We may even be able to find out who’ll be participating in each event.”

“That’s easy to say and all, but... is it actually going to go that smoothly?”

“We won’t be relying on luck, I’ll be guiding you guys through the specific details. The groundwork for all of this is the shit we start with them tomorrow. Besides, we’ll also be taking some other measures aside from just stealing info from ‘em. Like using this.”

“What the... is that a laxative?”

“This is a slow-acting laxative that begins to take effect after 48 hours. If we can trick some of ‘em into taking one of these, one or two of ‘em might not be feelin’ that good on exam day, eh?”

“Y-you. This type of crap is against the rules! What if it gets exposed!?”

“Who gives a shit?”

“...!”

“You really think I’m the type of person who cares about something like that?”

“Haa... Right, I remember now. That you were the type of guy who’d do anything to win.”

“If something happens then I’ll take full responsibility. Simple as that.”

Regardless of whatever penalty the school might impose on him, Ryūen wasn’t concerned in the slightest.

Even if the class ends up taking damage for it, they would still suffer a crushing defeat anyway.

“You only came up with this cuz you’ve already given up on being here before...”

“Earlier, when you said we’d save fighting as a trump card for later, did that mean you’d be willing to use force if things took a turn for the worse?”

“Yeah. It’s fairly typical for fights to break out amongst brats over petty random shit. It also wouldn’t be that bad if some of the people they’re planning to use in their events got into a fight with some of our incompetent classmates. That way, we’d prolly have an advantage on exam day, right?”

Now that he had set his mind on it, Ryūen definitely wouldn’t be easing up on Class B.

“I’ll become the commander on the day of the exam. It’ll be important to make Ichinose lose her cool as well.”

“You’re brutal...”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Let’s give ‘em a taste of what Class D’s capable of, aight?”

“Y-yesh!!”

“What kind of noises are you making?”

Ibuki let out a sigh, exhausted by the outrageous mess this had all turned into.

And yet, she found that she didn’t hate it for some reason, a feeling that disgusted her.

“But... Why are you doing this, Ryūen-san? It’s not just because you pitied us, right?”

“Hm, why indeed?”

Ryūen leaned back on the couch and shut his eyes. He had no lingering attachments to this school. At least, that was the case at first, but now that he was here, something in him had started to change a little.

Ayanokōji Kiyotaka. Ever since he lost to that man, he felt frustrated with the idea of leaving the school. By becoming the commander and forcing himself into a situation where he couldn’t look back, he was looking to confirm whether or not this frustration meant he wanted a rematch with Ayanokōji. If he really didn’t have any lingering attachments, he could just select people at random for the events and lose the exam on purpose.

But... if he still had regrets... if he felt a true, growing desire to face Ayanokōji again, he would find a way to survive. He wanted to know for sure which option he'd choose.

EPILOGUE

THE LINE BETWEEN THE WINNER AND THE LOSER

The sixth event was Archery, Class C's two-on-two event, and we had managed to secure the win thanks to Akito's strenuous efforts. Thus, the score evened out at three wins and three losses each.

During the event, Sakayanagi didn't say very much. Instead, she just quietly watched as it took its course.

It was as if she had wanted the score to tie at three to three like this.

Up next was the long-awaited final seventh event.

And, as a mischievous twist of fate, the result of the drawing was...

『Chess』 Required Participants: 1 ▪ Initial Time Allotted Per Person: 1 Hour
(Running out of Time will Result in a Loss)

Rules: Standard chess rules apply. However, your allotted time will not increase before each move, even after the 40th turn.

Commander Intervention: At any given time, the commander may give instructions to the participating player for a maximum of 30 minutes. Any time spent giving instructions will also use the corresponding participant's allotted time.

There was no rule requiring that time would be added at the start of each turn, such as the Fischer Rule.

This was probably a countermeasure meant to reign in the overall match time. It's fairly common for a typical chess match to take more than two hours, but they had probably set the time limit to one hour per person for the same reason.

"We'll be facing off in the seventh event with three wins apiece, and I couldn't be happier. Furthermore, for this event to be our finale... It seems good things really do come to those who wait after all."

Sakayanagi was probably looking to intervene at the peak of the match and provide her ally with instructions.

In fact, we were both probably going to have to intervene at roughly the same time.

Given the rules on commander intervention, it didn't seem like I'd be able to beat Sakayanagi without taking the match seriously.

"For us to have driven Class A all the way to the seventh event, isn't that a bit of a miscalculation on your part?"

"Yes. I suppose I must admit that you've pressured us quite well in the athletic events."

Sakayanagi spoke generally, reflecting on the six events that happened so far.

"Nevertheless, this seventh event is a little different. This battle will largely depend on the true abilities of the commander."

"I'm sorry to inform you, but I happen to be very good at chess."

From this point onward, Sakagami-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei would be observing our battle.

It was probably for the best to take a few precautions, just in case.

“My goodness... what a coincidence! Then it seems that my choice of chess may have been a mistake.”

But before anything else, there was the warm-up match. The event would start with a face-off between the students each of us had prepared.

I chose Horikita Suzune from the list of students who hadn't participated in any events yet.

Whereas the student Sakayanagi chose was none other than Hashimoto Masayoshi.

“So Horikita-san takes the stage after all? Even though she's an honors student, you hadn't used her because you wanted to hold onto her until the final event, isn't that right?”

“There's no reason for me to hold onto my trump card anymore.”

Our selections were communicated to each of the classes, notifying them to get moving for the start of the event.

“Would either of you like to get a drink of water?”

Hoshinomiya-sensei asked, worried about the two of us since we hadn't gotten up from our seats since the exam began.

“Thank you for your concern, but there's no need to worry.”

“I’m fine as well.”

“Is that so? Well, that’s good, then...”

Hoshinomiya-sensei sighed in a way that highlighted her discomfort. She didn’t seem to like the tense, strained atmosphere of the room.

“It seems that they’re ready. So, we will now begin the seventh event.”

At Sakagami-sensei’s direction, Sakayanagi and I put a stop to our idle chatting.

The stage they had prepared seemed to be the corner of one of the lecture halls. There, a lone chessboard had been set up.

[Please, go ahead.]

Horikita and Hashimoto both slowly bowed to one another.

At last, the final battle began.

Part 1

There is a chessboard in front of me, and I didn't even know the rules for it until about a week ago.

And right here, right now, I'm touching actual chess pieces for the first time in my life.

Throughout my specialized training with him over the computer, I had come to understand the depth and fun of chess.

If my opponent was Ayanokōji-kun or Sakayanagi-san, I'm sure I wouldn't stand a chance at all.

However, the man standing across the table from me is neither of those two.

Of course, I don't know just how skilled Hashimoto-kun is.

But, it's quite hard to imagine him being stronger than either of them.

“Good luck, Horikita.”

Like that, my opponent casually called out to me.

From what I've heard, even the people in Class A think he's a scoundrel.

“What's with the scary look? Don't you want to enjoy this situation a little more?”

“A Class A student like you, who's spent this past year at the top, wouldn't be able to understand just how meaningful this match is for us in Class C.”

“It'd suck for us to pay out a bunch of class points if we lose, just like you guys.”

The class that wins this chess match would earn 130 class points.

This was a truly monumental battle that would decide whether or not we could earn these points and graduate the first year.

“By the way, do you remember my name?”

“I’ve never spoken to you before, but it’s Hashimoto-kun, isn’t it?”

“I’m flattered you know. After all, you, Class C’s Horikita, are a bit of a celebrity. I first heard of you back when you foiled Ryūen’s plans during the Deserted Island Special Exam.”

I didn’t do anything back then. It had all been a part of the strategy Ayanokōji-kun had orchestrated behind the scenes.

No... It probably wasn’t even something he would call a strategy.

“I’ve only been playing chess for a few months now. Go easy on me, aight?”

“Unfortunately, I’ve only been playing for a week.”

“Really...?”

Even though we had yet to move any of the pieces, the battle had already begun.

There could be a mixture of truth and lies concealed within anything we say here. Our history with chess was only one example of that.

This was a battle to keep one another in check and find cracks in each other’s mentality.

This exam was very lenient when it came to small talk among the participants.

The only exception to this was with written tests where the answers might be spoken out loud. As the commanders, Ayanokōji-kun and Sakayanagi-san had most likely had many battles like this with one another by now.

And now that it was a three-to-three tie, it all depended on this seventh event.

This was all thanks to Hirata-kun's return to action, Sudō-kun keeping his cool, and the collective efforts of a truly great number of people.

Kōenji-kun's lack of action in the Flash Mental Arithmetic event was the only thing that I needed to reflect on, but that could be left for another day.

I absolutely can't afford to waste the chance I have in front of me.

I recalled the arrogant, shocking words Ayanokōji-kun left me with before the exam this morning.

[Nobody is stronger than me, even when I'm going easy on them. Remember that.]

As infuriating as it was to hear him say those words, oddly enough, they now felt incredibly reliable.

If Hashimoto-kun really is no match for him, then I have a chance to win too.

I don't know why, but it doesn't feel like I'm going to lose.

From even before the match began, all I could think about was how it felt like I had already secured the upper hand.



“Alright then, we will now begin the seventh event, chess. Please take your seats.”

Following the teacher’s instructions, I sat down.

The smile on Hashimoto-kun’s face didn’t waver, but his eyes weren’t smiling at all.

There was a direct connection between the outcome of this match and the fate of the two classes.

It seems that Hashimoto-kun has grasped the gravity of the situation as well.

“Welp, let’s get started.”

With that, Hashimoto-kun picked up two pawns, one black, one white.

“You know how to decide who goes first, yeah?”

“Yes.”

At my confirmation, Hashimoto-kun hid the two pieces in each hand and held them out to me, prompting me to choose.

“Left.”

Hashimoto-kun opened his left palm, revealing the white pawn.

In other words, I had the first-move advantage.

“I’m excited to see what your first move will be.”

“I’m not sure if it’ll meet your expectations.”

I picked up a pawn. As the first time I had ever physically touched a chess piece, it felt nice and cold.

And just like that, the seventh event, a battle between Hashimoto-kun and myself, officially began.

My first move—— Pawn to E4.

As the first piece moved upon the chessboard, the smile on Hashimoto-kun's face faded away.

And then, he made his responding move, Pawn to E5.

I quickly went to move my knight, aiming to take his black pawn.

Throughout all the matches I've played against Ayanokōji-kun, this was the methodology I had the most confidence in.

In order to protect the black pawn, your opponent would have to play reactively, allowing you to take control of the flow of the match.

“I've learned a lot from Sakayanagi myself. Did you really think I'm just gonna let you put black at a disadvantage right from the start?”

From the opening, we each made our moves without thinking too extensively about them.

I had one hour, but because Ayanokōji-kun was going to be using 30 minutes of that, I really only had 30 minutes.

I couldn't afford to waste my time overanalyzing the opening moves.

As the match went on, I noticed something. That is, he seemed to be refusing to play defensively.

I had no idea who had taught him to play like this, as the moves he was making didn't follow any of the standard strategies.

In fact, he was making one offensive move after another.

"I've got quite the twisted playstyle, don't I?"

"Indeed. Did you perhaps learn it from your teacher?"

"Yeah. Sakayanagi also plays just like I do. I guess you could say it just clicked for me the most when she was teaching me? Your style seems kinda steady compared to mine... Are you self-taught?"

He's probing me for something. What exactly was he looking to get from my response?

"I've been whole-heartedly devoted to chess for the past week, everything else was pushed aside."

"Oh really now...? Sounds like you were pretty confident that chess would get chosen, huh?"

"You're free to think whatever you like."

With each move, the pieces on the board went through a myriad of changes.

He would frequently surround my pieces, and at a glance, it may look as though he was driving me into a corner.

However, every move I made was meant to slowly encroach upon him.

“Have you really only played one week?”

“You sure love to talk.”

“I think talking is one of my strong points.”

As long as it isn't inappropriate, he's completely free to say whatever he wants.

I don't have the right to stop him.

“That's right, just one week. But, I can't deny it's possible that I may be lying.”

“If you've really only been playing for a week like you say, then I don't believe that you learned through self-teaching at all. I can only imagine that you've been thoroughly trained by some confident chess player just like our princess, eh?”

“I wonder. I wouldn't tell you either way.”

I'm not going to give him any unnecessary information if I can help it.

“Well, that's fine. More importantly, can I ask you some stuff about Ayanokōji?”

That's fine? From the look of it, he never cared about how experienced I was or whether or not I had a teacher in the first place.

Based on the way he's talking, it seems like his true goal is to find out more about Ayanokōji-kun.

So... Even Hashimoto-kun has started to notice him.

“What do you want to know?”

“Ever since the deserted island exam, I've been wondering if Ayanokōji was the one really controlling everything from behind the scenes. What do you think?”

He's trying to shake me up emotionally.

This is also probably one of the reasons why he was chosen to play against me.

“What makes you think that?”

“Just a hunch. Answer the question, Horikita.”

“What's there to answer? I don't even know what you're talking about.”

“Is that so? You seem fairly shaken to me, though.”

“When I found out you were my opponent, I already predicted you'd be trying to mess with me like this.”

“...Oh really?”

“No matter what kind of tricks you try to pull, you won't get through to me.”

With that, I used my bishop to check Hashimoto-kun's king.

Hashimoto's smile once again disappeared for a moment.

“I wonder if you still have the time to keep prattling like this?”

Now, after quietly biding my time for so long, I'll begin launching my counterattack.

“Things are getting interesting...”

And just like that, the match began to lean in my favor.

He's by no means an easy opponent, but each and every move he makes are well within my expectations.

Before we were even 10 minutes into the game, his hand stopped.

For the first time, he had to sit and think about what move he would make. That cocksure look he would give me from time to time was nowhere to be seen.

“Aaah, you’re a tough one, Horikita. It’s totally unexpected given that cute face of yours.”

“Despite your appearance, you also seem to be quite skilled yourself.”

“No need to butter me up, now. There’s always a bigger fish out there.”

If this match continues like this, my victory will be all but guaranteed. That’s the direction this is headed in.

There’s no way that the player within Hashimoto-kun hasn’t noticed this as well.

However- there’s no way that this match will end so simply like that.

Part 2

The confrontation between the two was broadcast on the large monitor.

Hashimoto was constantly on the offensive during the opening of the match, but Horikita handled it calmly.

She kept her composure, avoiding situations where one would reflexively try to sacrifice a piece in order to defend themselves.

And as the game steadily progressed, she had gained the upper hand.

They were just about to reach the mid-game, but Horikita's victory was gradually beginning to take shape.

Yes, Horikita held the advantage. It was a display of skill that far surpassed what she had shown during our training sessions.

“It's an interesting game. I'd love to see it through until the end.”

Sakayanagi spoke as an observer, without so much as a hint of urgency in her voice.

“I agree. Let's just see it through until the end then.”

“Fufu, although I'd like to allow it... I sadly cannot let that happen. It's not that I don't have faith in Hashimoto-kun, but Horikita-san just seems rather composed. Those verbal skills he specializes in don't seem to be having much of an effect on her.”

The time had come. A notification popped up on my screen informing me that Sakayanagi had opted to intervene in the match.

She must've come to the conclusion that Hashimoto would lose if she waited any longer.

Having to intervene so early in the match was also probably an unexpected situation for her.

Regardless, her decision to intervene was the right one.

If she had postponed it for even a few more minutes, Hashimoto would've been put in a position where the match would've already been decided.

That was just how terrifyingly strong Horikita was right now.

I felt tempted to sit and watch how things would play out for a little longer. I wanted to see just how much she had grown.

I was curious to see what kind of moves Horikita would make in a match against Sakayanagi.

“Aren't you going to enter the match, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“We would probably have a higher chance of winning if I left it to Horikita instead of letting me mess things up.”

“I see. Then, I suppose it's fine if I turn the tides in our favor?”

With that, she typed something with her keyboard. And then, Hashimoto, who had been stuck in consideration, sprung back to life like a fish that had found water.

The commander's 30-minute countdown timer would pause from the moment they pressed enter. Apparently, the time lag between transmissions was also

taken into account. Then, from the moment the opponent makes their next move, the countdown would begin once again.

Horikita versus Sakayanagi. I was earnestly hoping that the two of them were evenly matched.

If they were, Horikita may be able to hold onto her advantage until the very end. But, I didn't think it would turn out that way. Sakayanagi had entered the match with absolute confidence. Based on the recent flow of events, it was clear that the exceptionally skilled move that Sakayanagi had given Hashimoto had left Horikita anxious.

So, she had to think. She had to consider how she would fight when her opponent had changed to someone much stronger than her.

And, she had to be resolute. She had to make use of the time she had saved during the opening of the match and make her move.

“Maybe I didn't give her enough of a handicap.”

Each time Horikita made a move, it always took Sakayanagi less than five seconds to respond.

She would immediately respond with calculated moves that honed in on Horikita's weak points.

The opportunity Horikita had made for herself had vanished in the blink of an eye.

At this point, she was left with only the tiniest advantage. Horikita's hand stopped.

Though she was just a beginner, she probably felt the despair that came with being matched against an opponent whose power was far beyond her reach.

She was being closed in on, driven into a corner with no place to go.

Two, three minutes passed. There was simply nothing Horikita could do anymore.

This was the line. The dividing line that separated the winner from the loser.

Horikita couldn't deal with the pressure, so I chose to pick up the baton and signaled that I'd begin with my intervention.

Through the power of text to speech, this signal was sent to Horikita through her headset.

For a moment, Horikita looked up at the camera. She nodded, entrusting the rest of the thinking to me.

This wouldn't be a battle between Horikita and Sakayanagi anymore.

Instead, it was a one-on-one fight between Sakayanagi and myself.

"At long last... our match can truly begin."

"I guess so."

Even though I only had 30 minutes, that was more than enough to see this through to the end.

Sakayanagi and I continued our conversation while our hands tirelessly moved upon our keyboards.

Each move we made took anywhere from 10 to 20 seconds. And each time I pressed the enter key to send our instructions, the countdown timer would stop decreasing.

Having watched how the match had progressed so far, I could glean a rough idea of how it was going to play out.

Without pause, our pieces ran free upon the surface of the chessboard.

[Oioi! What kinda otherworldly play style are you guys using here...!?]

Through the large monitor, I could hear the sound of Hashimoto's voice calling out as he followed an instruction he had just been sent.

[Our match sure seems pathetic in comparison...]

[...You can say that again.]

Their shock was understandable. It was the difference between them and us, the difference between amateur and professional. To them, it may not even be clear which side had the advantage by looking at the board.

No... It went even further than that... It was something I was forced to understand when I first started playing the game.

I gasped.

Sakayanagi's skills were so profound that I couldn't help but want to show my respect.

I wouldn't even be remotely surprised if she were to make a name for herself in the world of chess in the future.

As a child, I learned how to play chess in the White Room.

I had played against a great number of so-called professional instructors, but she was better than all of them.

“So what do you think, Ayanokōji-kun? Have my moves managed to reach your heart?”

“Yeah. Painfully so.”

Even after the match went past the halfway point, instead of opening the gap between us and spreading my tiny lead, it took the full extent of my ability to prevent her from closing in on me.

If I made even one single mistake, she would probably break through all at once.

“No need to worry. After all, Ayanokōji-kun would never make a careless mistake.”

“If that’s the case, I wouldn’t mind if you gave up.”

“That’s a rather unreasonable proposal. If you don’t make a mistake, I’ll just have to use my strength to surpass you and break through from the front.”

At some point, Horikita and Hashimoto had been left speechless. They were nothing more than the medium for our hands to move the pieces on the board.

Eventually, during the second half of the match, Sakayanagi’s hand stopped.

Under more normal circumstances, I already knew what move Sakayanagi would make next.

But— she mysteriously became lost in thought instead.

Because our battle had been so fast-paced up until this point, Hashimoto was clearly shaken by what was happening.

Although he didn't say anything, he may have sensed that she was in trouble.

After a few minutes of silence, she made her move, and the move she came up with was a powerful one.

I hadn't made a mistake, and I also wasn't going to give her the opportunity to take the advantage away from me.

However—

My hand was the one that stopped this time.

“Ah, what a delightful match this has been! I don't care about the spectators anymore. Right now, I just want this to be one that I'll remember for the rest of my life!”

I didn't know how familiar with chess Hoshinomiya-sensei and Sakagami-sensei were.

That being said, the two of them were probably able to sense just how extraordinary this battle truly was.

One, two minutes passed. Time flew by without stopping.

All of the time I had saved up was slowly ticking itself away.

[What... What are you doing, Ayanokōji-kun?]

Through the large monitor, I could hear Horikita's uncertain voice as she sat and waited for my instructions.

[You've only got around five minutes left...!]

Of course, I was well aware of how much time I had.

This was a complex chess game, an amalgamation of the thoughts of four different people all on one chessboard.

There was no doubt that we, the once-dominant side, were now on completely even ground.

My next move would mean the difference between life and death.

No matter how much time I took reading into what move to make, it would still be worth it.

“You're not somebody who'd let something on this level stop you, right Ayanokōji-kun? Please show me what you've got.”

Instead of winning, Sakayanagi was only interested in drawing out the full extent of my potential.

For her, if it meant that she could enjoy herself, it didn't matter who won the exam.

There were less than three minutes left. I was forced to wipe my slate clean, to completely give up on the path to the end of the game that I had initially envisioned.

And then, I had to build a new path. One that would lead me to victory.

Just before the two-minute mark, I typed something into my keyboard and sent my instruction to Horikita.

As if she had been waiting for this moment, Horikita started moving one again.

The piece flew across the surface of the board, and for the second time, Hashimoto grew anxious.

Contrary to how the match had been progressing earlier, Sakayanagi's moves began to take longer.

Her first response took 30 seconds, as did the next. And the move after that took her a full minute.

I, on the other hand, was responding to her moves within one or two seconds each.

The two of us were now walking down a path that would lead to my victory.

The endgame was approaching. The outcome would be decided soon.

With my next move, checkmate would be all but certain.

She still had moves she could make to escape it, but those were few in number.

If she messed up, she would lose her last way out.

“Splendid...”

Sakayanagi spoke words of praise.

A minute passed, then two, then three. For the second time, Sakayanagi was lost in thought.

Her time was running out. Every precious second was slowly being stripped away.

Sakayanagi had been talking to me not too long ago, but now she had gone quiet.

[Oi oi oi!]

Hashimoto began shouting. Her remaining time ran down to two minutes, and then finally fell below my own.

If she ran out of time, she would have no choice but to entrust the rest of the match to Hashimoto, which would essentially ensure her defeat.

[Sakayanagi! Are we really gonna lose like this!?!]

Hashimoto probably wouldn't be able to come up with a way to escape.

Sakayanagi only had less than a minute left now.

"Truly, truly splendid, Ayanokōji-kun. You've given me more than I could've ever asked for."

As her time dwindled away, Sakayanagi sang me praises once again.

"Thanks to you, I've experienced firsthand what it's really like to break out in a cold sweat. You were quite the formidable opponent."

Just as she finished talking, Sakayanagi then added a few more words.

"—This is the end."

Sakayanagi muttered these words of defeat, but of course, Hashimoto wasn't able to hear her.

The commander did not have the authority to end the game.

When our time was up, it would be up to the player at the chessboard to admit their defeat.

Alternatively, Hashimoto could also continue playing until the final checkmate.

Either way, the match was over from the moment Sakayanagi expressed her willingness to admit defeat.

“It was a fun match. It really is quite regrettable that it has to end.”

She had less than 40 seconds. Her voice was calm, and as she spoke, I could hear the sound of her typing something into her keyboard.

Instead of acknowledging her surrender, her words were instead meant to highlight the confidence she had in the ferocious move she had come up with.

[...Atta girl, princess!]

It was a comeback from the brink of death by Hashimoto, or rather... by Sakayanagi, the one who was standing behind him.

Upon seeing the move she had responded with, I was struck by the sensation of shivers flowing down my spine.

She had brought the black side back from the dead, alive and breathing once again.

Over the course of the next two to three moves, it felt as though the match had deviated from my path.

And then— before I knew it, I found that I had been cornered.

I had been lured into walking down her own path without even realizing it.

Throughout the merciless back and forth of advantages, the time came for me to fall into silence once again.

Now, with less than a minute and a half to go on my own timer, I found myself facing my biggest hurdle yet.

As the one moving the pieces, Horikita must've sensed this as well.

Class A's defeat. Class C's victory. For her, these dreams must've seemed as though they were within her grasp only a few moments ago.

And now, Horikita probably felt as though these dreams had slipped through her fingers. I had less than one minute left.

[Ayanokōji-kun...]

Without looking up at the camera, Horikita spoke my name.

[I don't want to lose.]

And then, she gave voice to her feelings.

[I...]

She gave voice to the words she needed to say.

[I... I don't want to admit defeat... I want to win...]

It was a cry from the bottom of her heart.

[Even now, I'm still thinking, racking my brain over and over, trying to come up with the move I need to make in order to win.]

An emotional plea, completely uncharacteristic of her.

[But, I can't come up with anything that would work against Sakayanagi-san... You're the only one who can do something like that!]

I closed my eyes.

I only had a few dozen seconds left.

This was the end to end all ends.

Considering that the match would have to continue after this, our defeat would probably be decided within the next 30 seconds.

There were no safe routes anymore. I had to place my bet on the last chance I had at winning this battle.

I quickly began typing on my keyboard, writing out the move that I had come up with.

And then I hit enter, and the countdown of my timer stopped.

However, Horikita just sat there, silently waiting for my message to arrive, almost as if she was praying for it.

Around 30 seconds after I sent her my instruction, Horikita's eyes widened.

The long-awaited signal had apparently reached her through the headset.

I glanced at Sakagami-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei.

Their eyes were both glued to the large monitor, eagerly watching to see the outcome of the chess match.

[So you've still got some fight left in you... Ayanokōji.]

Hashimoto looked up at the camera with a complicated expression on his face. He was smiling, and yet not smiling at the same time.

Horikita made her move, and Sakayanagi's timer began counting down once again.

"Splendidly done, Ayanokōji-kun."

Upon seeing what move I had made, Sakayanagi praised me for the third time.

"I don't think I've ever experienced a match against such a complex, powerful opponent before. You've managed to answer my each and every move with an equal, or sometimes far greater move of your own."

She spoke, assessing what had happened. With my move, she had probably seen the end of the match.

"The move you made just now was certainly a perfect one. There's no doubting that you're at a level that an ordinary person could only dream of reaching."

Sakayanagi's words were filled with emotion and her voice trembled a little.

"—However."

Sakayanagi's voice quietly echoed throughout the room.

"With this, my victory is all but set in stone."

With that, she typed her instructions into her keyboard, which Hashimoto immediately carried out.

I responded with instructions of my own, prompting for the beginning of a flurry of movements between the two of us. The end of the match was drawing near.

There was no conversation, only the sound of pieces moving across the chessboard.

There were 5 moves left... and then 4... 3... Before finally...

Sakayanagi forced the checkmate via queen sacrifice.

It was a play that could even be called the ultimate trump card, where you sacrificed the queen, the strongest piece.

It's an exceptional play when it works, but the risks that come with it are high. If it fails, defeat would come shortly after. It was the plan I had decided on during the eleventh hour with my back up against the wall.

Horikita's hand stopped.

She held onto a faint hope that my words would once again come flowing through the headset, but that was only for a moment.

She had probably realized it herself by now too. That, at this point, there was no way to prevent the checkmate anymore.

The outcome had been decided.

[Ayanokōji-kun...]

But even so, there was something about it that Horikita just couldn't give up.

[Answer me, Ayanokōji-kun... Is there really nothing I can do anymore...?]

I took my hands off the keyboard.

[Ayanokōji-kun...!]

Horikita had wanted to beat Class A more than anyone else.

She had entrusted me with everything, thinking that I'd be able to handle it, or maybe even win it.

This was the finale, the seventh event. I wanted to commend her for gaining the upper hand against a tough opponent like Hashimoto.

This loss wasn't her fault in the slightest.

The opponent had simply played a better move than the one she had been instructed to make.

The countdown timer for commander intervention stopped at 0 and the connection between us was cut off.

[...It was my loss.]

Horikita lowered her head to Hashimoto, more so out of shame than courtesy.

[Thank you for the match.]

Hashimoto bowed in response.

“—And that's everything.”

With that, Sakagami-sensei, who had been quietly spectating throughout the match, announced the conclusion of the seventh event.

“Class A has won the seventh event. Therefore, the winner of this special exam, with 4 wins and 3 losses, is Class A. Class C's performance was also quite remarkable.”

The last event was over. For the time being, I would have to come up with an excuse. After all, I had intervened as the commander, and yet I still lost the chess match. Some people would inevitably be dissatisfied, wondering why I didn't just leave everything to Horikita.

“That was a great match... right? Either way, Class C did a super great job.”

Hoshinomiya-sensei attempted to console me with the same stuff as always.

“You’re free to cry into my chest if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Hoshinomiya-sensei.”

As she messed around with me, Sakagami-sensei sternly called out her name.

“I-it was just a joke. A joke!”

She jumped back a little and hurriedly bowed her head to Sakagami-sensei.

“But, Ayanokōji-kun. You seem to be like, way more amazing than I thought. You got that awful tenth question correct during flash mental arithmetic, and you even fought on equal footing with Sakayanagi-san in chess. Plus, you also got the hard questions correct during the written test events. Oh! What’s more, you can also run really fast if I’m remembering correctly...”

After saying all of that, Hoshinomiya-sensei pondered for a moment.

“The heck? Does this mean you’ve been hiding your abilities until now?”

“It just happened to work out well for me this time.”

“I see, so it was just a coincidence, huh? Those kinda things totally do happen sometimes~... As if...! Yep, I think I understand the reason why Sae-chan has her eyes on you, Ayanokōji-kun. It’s sooo not fair~.”

No matter how much I tried to hide it, there was no getting around the fact that some things simply had to be shown in front of the teachers.

“Don’t worry~. I won’t go around telling other students about what I’ve seen or heard here~”

As she spoke, she patted my shoulder gently. And then, she brought her mouth close to my ear and said:

“Sensei doesn’t dislike kids like you, Ayanokōji-kun, but, if you become an enemy, Sensei might just end up hating you the most.”

The smile on her face had vanished. Hoshinomiya-sensei left me with that and walked away.

From the look of it, I had inadvertently caused her to recognize me as a potential enemy of Class B.

“The exam is over. Students, please leave the room as soon as possible.”

“Sakagami-sensei, should we return to our classrooms first?”

“No, you’re done for today. You’re free to go straight home if you want.”

Apparently, there was no need for the classes to reassemble today. I was grateful for that.

“The students are so lucky, aren’t they? Getting to go back home and all.”

“Hoshinomiya-sensei, let’s get ready to clean up.”

“Fiine.”

Sakagami and Hoshinomiya began preparing to take down the event equipment from the multipurpose room. The atmosphere of the room was so relaxed that it

was hard to believe that such a tense battle had just been fought. Shortly thereafter, Sakayanagi leisurely emerged from the other side of the computer.

She had probably been waiting for the teachers to distance themselves from the two of us.

“Many thanks for today, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Yeah. You too.”

After the seventh event, the first thing we did was exchange pleasantries with each other.

It had only taken 30 minutes, but she had been going full throttle the entire time. Her fatigue was probably considerable.

“It takes endurance to play chess. There was Horikita-san’s marvelous response to Hashimoto during the opening, and then your own extraordinary fighting style that was even better than that. It truly was wonderful.”

Sakayanagi had a satisfied look on her face. It seemed like she had brought out her very best.

“Honestly, you were far stronger than I had imagined. You blew through Horikita’s advantage and I lost. There’s no doubt about it.”

“That’s not the case. It was a very good match. It could’ve gone either way until the very end. Though, you wouldn’t disagree that the one move I made toward the end was what made all the difference, yes?”

“Your queen sacrifice was brilliant.”

It all came down to what had taken place on the other side of the large monitor.

My instructions had interlaced with hers, and the result of that was that hers were superior.

Miracles, second chances, there was no room for any of that.

Victory and defeat were judged, determined, and decided at the school's discretion.

Even though we had put up a good fight, Class C had still lost to Class A, losing 30 class points in the process.

By itself, this only seemed like a minor injury, but we still had yet to see what happened in the other classes...

"Is there something you still want from me?"

"Something I want, is it? Not particularly."

With a gentle smile, Sakayanagi nodded her head in satisfaction.

"I was simply looking forward to facing off against you. And now, that wish has come true. I'm satisfied."

In which case, I guess I was just glad that I was able to give her what she wanted.

It would be troublesome if Sakagami-sensei got mad at us for talking like this for too long, so I got up out of my seat as well.

Just as I was about to reach for the door handle and leave, Acting Director Tsukishiro showed up in the multipurpose room.

"Well, the two of you have really gone and shown me something worth seeing."

"Why hello there, Acting Director Tsukishiro. Did you watch the special exam?"

“Yes. After all, those of us from the school have the obligation of making sure there has been no injustice. I was in the other room, keeping an eye on the two of you as you made use of commander intervention and watching as your match developed.”

With that, he clapped his hands as he praised the two of us.



“Neither one of you would give an inch. It was truly the definition of an evenly matched fight. Those of us from the school managed to collect some exceptionally good data from it too. I’m confident that this contest will serve as a great asset to the school for many years to come.”

When I looked into the Acting Director’s eyes, he stared straight back into my own with a delighted expression on his face.

And with that, I understood everything without even having to talk to him.

“I’m quite glad you enjoyed the show, Acting Director Tsukishiro.”

Sakayanagi bowed her head. Above all else, she felt a supreme sense of fulfillment that our competition had finally reached its conclusion.

“Come to think of it, has the dust settled between Class B and Class D?”

“Yes. They finished about an hour ago.”

A considerably fast resolution.

“Which class won?”

It seemed as though Sakayanagi was also interested in hearing the results.

“Class D won with five wins and two losses. It was a big upset.”

So Ryūen defeated Ichinose. This meant that they had gained 190 class points.

Class D, or rather, Class C, had come back to life.

And, this also meant that we would have to start all over again from Class D.

“This must be quite the painful defeat for Ichinose-san. Well, I suppose it’s understandable.”

If it hadn't been for Ryūen, Class B definitely would've won the exam.

I found myself wondering: Had he taken action for himself, or for the sake of his class?

Whatever the reason, this meant that something within that guy had started to change.

And at the same time, this also meant that a looming threat had returned for Ichinose.

“Alright everyone, let's leave the room. The special exam is over. Teachers, I ask that you please take your leave as well.”

The Acting Director prompted for both Sakagami-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei to leave.

“But, we still need to take care of—”

“We will take care of that on our end.”

At the Acting Director's signal, several workers flooded into the room all at once.

“Who are all of these people? They're not school personnel, are they?”

Sakagami-sensei asked, his voice full of doubt.

“It seems that the government would like to get its hands on the data from this exam as soon as possible. That's why they've dispatched all of these people, so please rest assured.”

Since the Acting Director was the one who said it, as a teacher, Sakagami-sensei had no choice but to pull back and listen to his instructions.

The two teachers promptly rushed to complete their final tasks and left the multipurpose room together with Sakayanagi and me.

Then, the teachers walked away, headed off in the direction of the staff room without paying any further attention to either of us.

Sakayanagi, on the other hand, cast a glance at the workers with a dubious look on her face.

However, before we could watch for too much longer, the door to the multipurpose room was shut and we could hear the sound of someone locking it from inside.

“Is something bothering you?”

Acting Director Tsukishiro, who did not stay inside the multipurpose room, asked Sakayanagi.

“No. It’s nothing.”

“Is that so?”

At this point, I felt that I should head back home as well. When I checked my phone, I found that I had received a message from Horikita.

[Thank you for your hard work.]

It was a short message. I’d certainly be hearing complaints and grumbling from her later.

“See you later Sakayanagi.”

I attempted to leave her with a few light words and head back home, but...

“—Could you please wait a moment, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“What is it?”

Sakayanagi called out and stopped me as I began walking down the hallway.

She should’ve still been relishing the sweet taste of victory, but her expression had instead begun to cloud over.

“...Did you really think that move you made at the end was the best choice you had available?”

She seemed to question the conclusion I had reached after a lengthy period of consideration toward the very end of the match.

“You’re the one who won. What more could there be to it?”

“No... I’m sorry. It looks like I’ve gone and imagined something silly.”

“Aren’t you happy that you beat me?”

“It’s nothing like that. It’s just, maybe, somewhere in the back of my mind, I was actually hoping that I’d lose to you.”

Once again, I felt that she had an unusual way of thinking.

“I’ll say this now: I didn’t go easy on you.”

“Yes, I know that.”

But even so, Sakayanagi still didn’t seem convinced for some reason.

Maybe in her eyes, I was simply that much greater than I really was.

“You’re such a cruel man, Ayanokōji-kun.”

With these words, Acting Director Tsukishiro, who was still standing in front of the door to the multipurpose room, casually intruded in on our conversation.

Sakayanagi turned and looked behind her. And, albeit reluctantly, I had no choice but to turn and look back as well.

The Acting Director came and walked over to us with a gentle smile on his face before once again repeating himself.

“You’re a cruel man.”

“What do you mean by that, Acting Director Tsukishiro?”

It was not me, but Sakayanagi who asked that.

“How about you give her the answer, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You should’ve just told her honestly.”

The Acting Director clearly had some time to spare after finishing with his ‘business’ in the multipurpose room.

“Properly speaking, the winner of that chess match should’ve been Ayanokōji-kun.”

As soon as he spat out these inexcusable words, there was no way that Sakayanagi wouldn’t get caught up in it.

But, why would this man go out of his way to put himself at risk by saying it?

“What are you talking about? At the end of the day, I lost.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. You did indeed lose.”

The Acting Director was speaking in a way that really highlighted his true character.

“But, your input was different... wouldn’t you say?”

Sakayanagi, who had been listening to us in silence, began to understand the current situation. And then, it dawned on her.

“How stupid... You’re saying that the school forcibly intervened in our exam?”

Her reaction was undoubtedly fueled by anger. It went beyond regret or disappointment; Indignation was the better term for it.

“You’re the one at fault, Sakayanagi-san. Not only did you refuse to follow my orders, but you even gave a protection point of all things to Ayanokōji-kun. I had no choice but to be a little bit forceful in order to take that away from him, wouldn’t you agree? This is still a school, right?”

I see. So he was exposing all of this just to get back at Sakayanagi.

“Good grief. If everything had gone as planned, we would’ve been able to force Ayanokouji-kun out of school this time. But, there seem to be quite a few overzealous teachers here at this school who are making my job rather difficult.”

During the match, there was an instruction I had sent to Horikita after a lengthy period of consideration.

But, it took around 30 seconds for the instruction to make it from my keyboard to Horikita’s headset.

Up until that point, the time lag for each instruction I sent had been closer to 10 seconds.

The reason for this discrepancy is that the instruction had been fabricated before being played out over the headset.

The instruction had been manipulated from within the computer, so the input and the result had been different things altogether.

“At the time, he was going to make a different move. It was even better than the best move we thought he could make. I had even gone so far as to prepare a large number of personnel and machines to account for his options, but we were still forced into making an extremely difficult decision.”

If they had changed it to a sloppy, unskilled move, it would’ve been painfully obvious that something unnatural had happened.

So, in order to avoid that, Acting Director Tsukishiro was forced to come up with a difficult move that would still give the result he wanted.

“In that sense, Sakayanagi-san did an excellent job of seeing through the weakness of the move we chose.”

That was hardly even a compliment.

“Why didn’t you say anything, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“Even if he had, it wouldn’t have mattered. No, rather, he wouldn’t have been willing to say anything to you in the first place.”

Acting Director Tsukishiro went on to explain.

“It’s simple, really. As a former member of the White Room, and moreover, as someone who forcibly snuck his way into this school, there’s no way he’d want to draw attention to himself.”

If word got out that Tsukishiro had interfered with me, it could give rise to some very troublesome issues later on.

It was frustrating to say the least, but I simply had no other choice but to give up and accept it.

“Even if it’s tragic, a victory is a victory. You should be grateful.”

“...You’re quite skilled at provocations, Acting Director. However— just know that you’ll be paying dearly for that, alright?”

Upon seeing Sakayanagi’s anger-filled smile, Acting Director Tsukishiro simply applauded once again.

“For a mere child in your first-year of high school, you say some awfully interesting things. Have you gotten an inflated ego just because you’re the princess of the playground?”

Generally speaking, if you were a student standing in the same ring as Sakayanagi, you wouldn’t want to make an enemy out of her.

But to this man, she probably seemed like nothing more than a child talking bigger than they really were.

“You said that I’ll be paying dearly, so by all means, show me what you meant by that. Come on, quickly now.”

A brief silence passed. There was no way that anything would have happened.

“Well, it’s about time for me to go. We adults have plenty of work to do, after all.”

Acting Director Tsukishiro began walking, deliberately pushing his way in between the two of us as he went.

“If possible, please choose to drop out of school voluntarily. That way we won’t have to get any other students tangled up in this.”

Leaving me with those words, Tsukishiro left, headed off down the hallway. After he was gone, Sakayanagi began to slowly walk away as well.

“Well, this has gone and ruined everything. How immensely unsatisfying.”

“Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Ayanokōji-kun. I’m just disappointed that an adult felt the need to intrude upon the affairs of children. He took my most precious memory and trampled on it.”

She didn’t seem to care that her victory had been flawed at all.

She simply couldn’t forgive the fact that the integrity of the chess match had been trifled with.

“It’s just— don’t you think it’s somewhat unreasonable to just ask me to accept it like this?”

Sakayanagi stopped walking and looked up at me.

“Yeah. You’re certainly not wrong.”

I had intended to keep quiet about Acting Director Tsukishiro's interference, but maybe it wasn't a bad thing that Sakayanagi had found out about it. Albeit only a little bit, the situation had left me feeling cheated as well.

"So, please play with me again, starting from the move just before the Acting Director interfered!"

I could've easily rejected her proposal right then and there.

But, if I did, I felt something inside Sakayanagi would've broken. And, something within me as well.

"I have no reason to turn you down I guess. But, where should we go?"

"Did you know that there's a chessboard in the library?"

"No... that's the first time I've heard of it."

"I occasionally use it to play chess from time to time. Let's go there and use that."

I had no reason to reject her proposal, so the two of us headed over to the library.

There was nobody there today, probably because the special exam was over and all of the courses were finished.

Inside the silent library, I picked up the chessboard.

I then placed the board on a little table, just large enough for two people.

Sakayanagi skillfully arranged the pieces to the state it was in before.

"Here, the same situation as earlier. Please, show me your true move."

I picked up the piece and placed it where it was meant to be.

Part 3

The match began, and time flowed by without so much as a word from either of us.

As the sun began to set, the only sound was the repeated clatter of the white and black pieces on the chessboard.

But that didn't last for very long.

There was no need to spend much time on the match since it was already at the final stages when it began.

And before long, the match ended. Sakayanagi quietly let out a sigh as she stared at the board in front of her.

A way to avoid checkmate was nowhere to be found.

“As expected of you, Ayanokōji-kun. It's my loss.”

It had been a life and death match, move for move.

It didn't seem like she was discontent or anything, she just acknowledged her loss with satisfaction.

“You sure are honest about it.”

“Do I look like some haughty lady who can't acknowledge her own defeat?”

I'd be lying if I said I couldn't see it.

“What I wanted to know was where things stood between the two of us. Who stood above the other. I'd never sit here and complain about the result.”

“Though, while I may have won, this was just a recreation. There’s no guarantee that the match would’ve progressed like this at that time and at that precise moment.”

I couldn’t discount the possibility that it was a move I had managed to think of due to the extra time given to me.

No, even more importantly—

“This match was the outcome of the advantageous situation Horikita had created during her match with Hashimoto. As far as I see it, I intervened while we still had the upper hand. I don’t think it was a very fair match.”

The match had only developed the way it had because Horikita had passed her advantage onto me. The fact that Sakayanagi had been able to overcome that while at a disadvantage was a testament to how strong she truly was.

If we played each other from scratch, there was no guarantee that I’d win.

Even if she proposed to have a rematch with me, I’d want to avoid it if I could.

“Is that your way of comforting me?”

Sakayanagi chuckled, finding my response strange.

“That’s not it. I was just objectively stating the facts.”

“I’m satisfied with this result. Isn’t that enough?”

If she was satisfied, then that was certainly alright. That being said, it still didn’t make me feel better.

“When this special exam was announced, you could’ve chosen to face me directly by restricting the one-on-one event even further. If you had proposed something like that, I still would’ve accepted. But even so, you didn’t. Why was that?”

Of course, it would’ve still been a random battle fought using only seven of the ten events, so there would’ve been no guarantee that it’d get chosen. But, if the two of us had come to an agreement surrounding both of our one-on-one events, the chances of everything working out would’ve been rather high.

“The reason is simple. As you must have reasoned, there was no guarantee it would be chosen. Also, if you indiscriminately competed with me in this one-on-one match, the people around you would surely be suspicious. I wanted to avoid letting either of those things happen. Though, it was taken advantage of by the Acting Director in the end.”

Sakayanagi had planned out the special exam while also being as considerate to my circumstances as possible.

That was probably the reason why she had gotten so furious over Tsukishiro’s intervention.

The seven events chosen today and the order they were chosen in were most likely not randomly generated at all.

It simply hadn’t been a fair match from the start.

“Besides, Hashimoto-kun was the most talented chess player in Class A, and yet he lost to Horikita-san after being taught by you. That just means that I lost in that respect as well.”

Sakayanagi peacefully bowed her head to me.

“Ayanokōji-kun. It was a pleasure to face off against you. The answer I was looking for is clear to me now. You are certainly a genius. Your skill is by no means fake.”

“You don’t plan on taking revenge with chess again?”

“Do you want me to?”

“...No, I don’t.”

“Fufu, how honest.”

The fact we managed to have this game just between the two of us was, in and of itself, thanks to the extremely rare situation we were in.

The special exam was over and tomorrow marked the beginning of a long break. Thus, we had been able to find a place without anyone else around.

“As for the reason why I’m not planning on taking revenge... Honestly, I got the impression that you and I are fairly evenly matched when it comes to chess. If we played ten games, it wouldn’t be strange if we each ended up with five wins and five losses. Would you disagree with that?”

“No, I agree completely.”

Interestingly enough, our true abilities were a perfect match.

If we were to face off again, it would definitely play out the way Sakayanagi predicted it would.

“But, I get the feeling that the winner of this first bout was you, Ayanokōji-kun. I think I would’ve lost back then, during the critical moments. Well, you have a slightly longer history with chess than me, after all. Perhaps that made the difference.”

A slightly competitive look showed on her face, emphasizing the importance she placed on winning.

“If I were to take revenge using chess, that would take the fun out of it. For me, chess is a leisure activity, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

As she spoke, she picked up one of the knights from the chessboard.

“Seeing as though you brought up my history with chess, that means you did see me back then after all?”

“Yes. I was watching as you relentlessly overwhelmed your opponents in the White Room. I’ve been fond of chess ever since, believing the day would come when I’d face you myself.”

The hunch I felt when I saw the list of events Class A proposed had been spot-on.

That, it wasn’t a mere coincidence that chess had been chosen as an event.

“Well then— let’s hurry back, shall we?”

“I’ll put it away. Just sit there and wait for a bit.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll gladly take you up on that.”

I went and returned the pieces and board back to their original places.

“It’s with regret that must I say this, but I will be keeping my distance from you from now on. If I were to continue fixating myself on you, our classmates would probably start to suspect something. Furthermore...”

“Furthermore?”

“I’ve been dying to get to know you for so long now. To me, you’re like a childhood friend I’ve never met; One I’ve always, always chased after. If it’s easy for us to compete with one another, it would probably end up losing some of it’s value to me.”

A faint smile appeared on her face as she looked at me with affection in her eyes.

“Though, knowing Acting Director Tsukishiro, this is no time for students to be fighting amongst each other anyway.”

A perfect example of the school getting its priorities backward. Under normal circumstances, this school is supposed to have students fighting one another.

Even if we competed in similar ways later, there was no guarantee that he wouldn’t interfere again at some point.

It’s probably more accurate to say that he’d do whatever it takes to get in my way.

In that respect, I was grateful that I only needed to be careful of him now.

If I was surrounded by enemies on all sides, the exhaustion that would come with it would be considerable.

The two of us left the library.

“Come to think of it, this is the first time we’ve left the school together like this.”

“Now that you mention it, you’re right.”

There was always somebody else together with her.

Moreover, the idea of the two of us walking side-by-side together like this wasn’t the most natural one out there.

“I must apologize for being such a slow walker.”

“You don’t have to apologize for that.”

Her walking speed was certainly slow, but it was because of her handicap.

And strangely enough, today, I felt thankful for that.

If I walked as I usually did, I would reach the dorms in no time at all.

“What are you thinking of doing from now on?”

“It just depends on what Tsukishiro does next. He may just be filling in for your father, but he’s still the director. Ordinary methods won’t work for him.”

“You’re right. Given the current situation, Father’s reinstatement doesn’t seem like it’ll come easily after all.”

“What are you planning on doing?”

As I asked, Sakayanagi pondered for a bit.

“For the time being, I’ll spend my time enjoying myself as I always have. If Katsuragi-kun starts opposing me again, I’ll act as his opponent. If Ichinose-san comes chasing after my position, I’ll have fun crushing her back down as I play with her. If she got herself expelled, I’d have the pleasure of watching as Class B falls apart as well.”

She smiled like a little girl who was innocently playing with her dolls.

“I didn’t foresee Ryūen-kun’s move but... If he’s come back to the battlefield, I’d like to face off against him as well. Thinking of it, it seems like it may not be such a boring school life after all.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“What about you, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“I’d like to avoid doing anything that would make me stand out if possible. Other than that, just keep making Horikita do her best.”

“And I’m sure she’s going to have quite a lot of growth to show for it. I’ll look forward to it.”

Someday, Horikita may just be able to get her name on the list of opponents that Sakayanagi was willing to take seriously, right alongside Ichinose and Ryūen. If that were to happen, Sakayanagi would surely enjoy her school life here all the more.

“...There’s one thing I have to apologize for.”

“Apologize?”

“Earlier, I told you about why I wanted to avoid a one-on-one match with you, but that was a lie.”

She had said it was to avoid putting me under the spotlight, her consideration so to say.

But now she withdrew that statement.

“To tell you the truth, I just wanted to be together with you, even for one second longer.”

As she spoke, she extended her right hand out to me.

I took it, thinking it was a handshake, but when I squeezed back, she put her left hand over, enveloping mine.

“People learn of warmth when they touch each other, and that’s a very precious thing. The warmth of another human is by no means a bad thing. Please remember that.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a belated message from me to you.”

Before I was able to understand what she was saying, she slowly released my hand and started walking once again.

“Come now, let’s go back.”

It didn’t seem like she was willing to explain it any further.

Together, we watched the sunset as we slowly made our way back home.

“Oh, by the way, have you heard? Yoshida-kun from class A—”

We didn’t have the type of relationship where we’d reminisce about the past.

There were no objectives or ulterior motives. The two of us simply exchanged tales about our daily lives.

All the way until the very moment we arrived at the dorms.



KARUIZAWA KEI SS – THE FIRST GIFT

There was a little box resting in my hand. It was so light, yet it felt so heavy.

My heart rate was rising like the high tide. It easily surpassed 120 beats per minute.

“So, I’m going to confirm something, fine with you?” I asked.

Trying to conceal my nervousness, I looked at Kiyotaka. But I couldn’t meet his eyes. My gaze flickered around his nose disguising trying to act as if I was looking at him.

I’m confident that I would swoon looking directly in his eyes now.

A birthday plus white day gift from Kiyotaka.

I neatly unwrapped it so it could be wrapped again later. Then— I opened the cover.

“Wha...What is this!?”

I screamed out my first impression before I knew it.

A heart-shaped necklace shining in gold.

“It’s a necklace.”

“Yeah, even I can see that! A too heavy present, you know!”

I mean, isn't that almost a confession!/?

N-no, I've never been confessed to so I can't be sure.

But, but, I was sure it was a present way surpassing what friends give each other.

I faintly remember that I said he should return the favour many times back, but that was just meant as a little joke.

“Heavy?”

I wasn't sure whether to be happy or sad, that idiot was just looking as if he had no clue.

Even if that was intentional that would mean, well in other words, that right? I imagined an unreal situation, but then chased it in the furthest back on my mind.

“B-but you don't give a necklace to a friend, you know!” I first have to tell him how strange this present was.

“And, and you know? It doesn't seem to fit me either! This is heart-shaped, you know!”

It was true I didn't think it would fit me, but that wasn't the big issue.

This was the kind of thing that frequently made girls misunderstand, wasn't it! Come on, really!

“Heart-shaped, you know!”

I thought I perhaps was being confessed to so accept my feelings !

“*Fuu, fuu*” (TN: Sound of huffing and puffing)

My feelings exploded without me realising it, but... that was probably my fault. He probably bought it since I requested a pricy gift in return. Listening to the full details later, I understood. It was something he, who had never gifted a present to a girl, had earnestly chosen.

In other words— it was his first gift.

Of course I will receive it.

Aah, he got me.

I thought as I was looking at myself, wearing the necklace, in the mirror.

Would a time come when I would wear this and go together with him somewhere? That would definitely be a very enjoyable day.

That I was certain of.

SAKAYANAGI ARISU SS – THE TIME OF REALISATION

In a multi-purpose room. Me and Ayanokouji-kun would be spending some time alone in here. The teachers started talking among each other so they must be doing the final checks.

The strong beatings in my chest felt pleasant to me. Every time I looked at Ayanokouji-kun in front of me, my whole body felt hot as if not wanting to look away.

Fufu, just like a maiden in love, isn't it?

I observed myself as if I was a bystander, while enjoying myself from the bottom of my heart.

Let's savour this moment by striking some conversation before the match starts.

The time he and I was granted together was decisively limited after all.

“Finally... finally this day has come at last. I really couldn't sleep yesterday so I almost overslept today.”

I earnestly started talking about my morning. I stammered a bit since it was the first time raising my voice for a while alone with him. He looked a bit troubled but replied back.

“I have no recollection of making you wait though. Me meeting you was a coincident in the first place.”

It was easy to think why he would have doubts regarding whether it was a coincident or not.

“You are saying that if you did not enter this school, we would never have met?”

The world is big. True, the fact we met once again may have been close to a coincidence.

“Certainly, the fact we met at this school was a coincidence. However, I’m convinced I would meet you again someday. It was meant to be, yes fate.”

Yes, it was not a coincidence, it was inevitable.

“Fate? That’s quite an abstract thing to say.”

True, there was no logic to that, just some hunch. But... here we were talking to each other, right? Ayanokouji-kun.

If this wasn't fate, what else would you say it was?

“It’s because I’m also a maiden.”

But there was probably no need to say more than that.

“If you didn’t enrol at this school, that should only have been a delay of 3 years. I had confidence I could hide my anticipation deep inside my heart without rushing it.

But, I can’t hold it back anymore. inevitably, I felt the days becoming longer knowing you were there by my side. I want to fight, suppressing that feeling have been quite difficult. That’s the extent of my dream.”

A loved one. I was thinking of him as my childhood friend, although selfishly. That's why I couldn't stop the overflowing words by my own will. I was talking to him non-stop, as if I was yearning for him, one topic after another. That calm look he gave me and those pupils gave me an even greater pleasure.

“Are you not afraid of waking up from that dream?”

Nothing is as kind as a dream. When you wake up from that dream and return back to reality, that happiness will disappear in a moment. Fighting Ayanokouji-kun and lose, and then despair. Or, winning so easily that all that's left was disappointment.

I couldn't overlook the chance that it could happen.

But that was fine.

“Because dreams are things you are meant to wake up from.”

If I could find an ‘answer’, I will be satisfied with that.

“Normally, I would ask you to... go easy on me but...”

I pierced his elusive pupils.

“Please meet me with all you have.”

He definitely, although just faintly, confirmed by a nod. And at the same time, I could begin to guess what he had in mind. The thing keeping me from enjoying myself to the fullest, its true identity.

“It would be a lie to say that I don't have any conflicting feelings about this. An inadequate test like this won't be good enough for us to prove our abilities. Us leaders are limited to how we can influence the outcome, right?”

The main point of this exam was how the difference in abilities between the classes would spell victory or defeat. The leaders' intervention and the rules for the events are nothing more than accessories. Of course there would be classes that would force their way through, but that was a story for another time.

“That being said, if the leaders' influence was too large another problem arrives. I think I ought to consider your situation too Ayanokouji-kun. You don't want your classmates to figure out your real abilities, right?”

This special exam had meaning in that it was simply a secret duel between me and Ayanokouji-kun. It was just an extension of a game, played in secret, unknown to the teachers and other students.

That's why it was understandable why Ayanokouji-kun was looking so suspicious. No matter how limited our way of fighting may be, it would be fine as long as it was fair for today. Ascertaining anything more or less would be a luxury so it was best left unspoken.

The teachers were approaching. The special exam will start very soon.

“A—right! The exam will soon begin! Back to your seats!”

After hearing what Hoshinomiya-sensei said, me and Ayanokouji returned back to our seats.

I could no longer see his face, but there was no need to be discouraged by that.

Because as long as we were in the same room, I could exchange words with him anytime, as many times as I wanted.

“Best regards, Ayanokouji-kun.”

I sent a greeting in his direction in a voice so low that nobody could hear.

I suppressed the throbbings of my heart—

And now, the time my dreams will be realised has come

KUSHIDA KIKYOU SS – A TRULY FRIGHTENING PERSON

“Hey, do you have some time?”

I was about to go home when a boy behind me called out. I didn’t even need to turn around, it was that boy again. He was always following that girl around, a really troublesome person.

“What is it, Ayanokouji-kun?”

I made a smile and then slowly returned his gaze. I cannot show any gaps regarding my appearance here in this school corridor, in a public space.

“I see, so you aren’t going to support her this time.”

I was wondering what he was about to say since he ran after me... I felt exasperated inside but still put up my guard.

“Can we talk while walking?”

“That’s fine.”

This boy called Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun, his whole existence was like an ungraspable shadow to me.

“Do you have any plans for today?”

“Yes, I’m planning on meeting up with some girls from class B. You think having fun considering what’s happening now is considered bad, don’t you?”

From the first time we met, he was just an unremarkable student. He was somewhat good-looking, but that was it. He wasn't particularly athletic or smart. Just a normal person.

"No, it's necessary to take breaks. I think everyone understands that.

But— I was far too naive.

Maybe this boy, possesses something even greater than what I judged him to. Like what he's doing now, trying to shake me up pointing out my actions one by one.

"So you do understand it, the reason I'm not doing anything right now? I was thinking it was fine to expel you and assisted Yamauchi with it. What face do you think I should make, what act do you think I can put up to lead the class, after everything was brought to light?"

I was being honest, explaining to him why I couldn't do anything in my situation.

"You don't seem to accept that do you? I can see it on your face—"

"Well, yeah."

As could be expected, there was no way he would accept just from this explanation, right?

Even though it should have worked for any other idiot.

"I'll say it now, it's not that I don't want to help Horikita-san because she's the leader now, okay?"

That's the worst part of it though...

“Is that true?”

He was doubting me, but no way will I ever acknowledge it.

“Really, it’s true.”

But this boy didn’t change his expression.

“Ah, I doubt it.”

“How do I look like to you, I wonder? How about it?”

I wasn’t particularly interested, but he caught my attention.

I want to know what this boy is thinking, what he is feeling.

If I not— I won’t be able to remove that girl.

That’s why it was inevitable for me to, just barely, show a little bit of my inner self, to him.

If I don’t.... I don’t think I can ever win.

Surely, this boy must be—— a frightening person.

SAKAYANAGI ARISU SS – THE MORNING OF FULFILMENT

I was deep at sleep.

The appearances of myself when I was young, and of him was repeatedly projected within.

A famous museum of that world. Even the exhibition objects made for an artistic spectacle I think. It was that grandeur, that sweet, and that madly affectionable.

In a sense, that was love.

There are many kinds of love.

Love, charity, affection... love-and-hate.

I think, I feel all of those towards him.

“...3 hours and 36 minutes...”

Each time I wake up, I always check how much time I’ve slept. If I don’t sleep for 7-8 hours, I don’t feel refreshed. That was because I was so excited last night that I couldn’t sleep.

The body pillow I use to support my sleep every day didn’t seem to work that much.

“Fufufu...”

I let out a sweet laughter before I knew it.

I have never experienced becoming this excited before so I couldn't control my feelings.

The more I tried to hold back the laughter, a smile appeared, so naturally, on my face.

I can't help it.

I was exposed by the contradiction dwelling within myself right now.

A me that would never lose to anyone.

A him that maybe would teach me defeat.

The conflicting feelings were clashing, going back and forth, neither side yielding.

However, there will definitely be a conclusion.

In other words, superiority and inferiority will be decided.

Ah— how beautiful it is.

I hugged my body pillow tightly and a pleasant drowsiness came over me.

I was already napping, wanting to enjoy a passionate dance with him.

That dream of mine was being interrupted by the cold sounds of the ringing sounds from my cellphone.

“Was that Masumi...? She's also a worrywart, right.”

I know. Let's continue the rest of my dream later tonight.

After I have settled it with him, made it clear as black and white.

At my leisure.

HORITIKA SUZUNE SS – AN ENCOURAGEMENT OF ADVENTURE

This is what happened on a certain holiday.

A few students gathered in my room.

"VR experience?"

"Yes! VR experience."

Sotomura and Ike showed a cheerful smile, holding something that looks like a helmet. It seems to be the latest game; when you put on this thing to play, you can experience the game in a virtual space.

"It seems like 4 people will play as a team so I want to try."

That's why there are four devices.

"Then why did you look for me and Ayanokōji-kun?"

"If we let Ken play, he will become obsessed and will always want to keep it for himself. If it's you then it won't be like that."

Horikita looked completely uninterested, but I was a little bit interested in playing.

Men are creatures driven by adventurous spirit, aren't they?

"We were called out during our free time because of this boring thing?"

Horikita stood up, staring at Ike.

"I'm not going to take part."

"Wait! This is a game that recommends 4 people, so ah... just play for a while, please!"

"I'm not interested in things such as games."

"Please think about it again!"

The two guys seemed to be repeatedly begging on the ground in prostration.

"How about just listening to them? This could also be for the class."

Trivial interactions like these can also make progress in interpersonal relationships.

"..... Good grief. Only for a while, right? Then I'll head back after."

Like this, Horikita eventually accepted it. She reluctantly put on the device. Sotomura and Ike followed right after.

"There are 12 occupations at the beginning. Choose according to your own preferences. Ah, don't choose the same as the others. I choose the Paladin! It looks very handsome!"

Ike was a Paladin, while Sotomura chose the Elf. From the description, it appears to be a character in defense and recovery. The importance of the defense is not yet clear.

Horikita simply selected the Swordsman, which is the first option, while I picked a job called the Summoner.

After the career selection was over, I felt my consciousness instantly slipped away and my vision is covered with white light, then the sight of the imaginary world came into view.

I have been introduced to mobile games soon after entering school, but compared to those, the quality of this game is not just in the same dimension.

"This is really..... very amazing."

It's no surprise that Horikita couldn't help but gasped.

Despite being imaginary, the realism of it is not far away from an actual world.

There was a smell of trees coming from elsewhere.

I tried to pinch my arm, but there was not really any pain, just only a tiny feeling. This is probably necessary in order to stay connected with reality.

I could confirm that my body, except for the appearance of different clothing, seemed no different.

"It's like the real world."

Horikita said something similar to what I was thinking.

She tried to pull out the sword she was wearing on her waist.

"But I haven't touched this thing once, huh?"

"It seems there is a technical correction, and you can't become stronger without accumulating EXP."

"Even if you say so,——"

Horikita wielded the sword several times with awe and then sheathed it.

"Oh! That's fast! The beginner tutorial is here!"

Ike wielded his shield and sword excitedly, although he was still not used to the movements.

Two wolf-shaped monsters appeared in front of us.

"Are you going to fight this thing?"

"Horikita, you need to fight too. Please, swordsman!"

Ike then put up his shield.

"Wouldn't there be all sort of ethical issues? Like killing animals?"

"It's just a game..."

The monsters pounced on us in an instant.

"Hey! Woah!! Why are you attacking me first! Is there any passive skill that attracts monsters??"

Ike said something that people normally couldn't really understand, and was sent flying back to the ground by the wolves.

"Hurts, it hurts, it's numb and painful! Help me!"

Sotomura hurriedly chant a recovery spell, but it had very little effect.

"Hori..... Horikita and Ayanokōji! Help! Help me!"

Ike desperately asked us for help. But I had no idea what to do. Speaking of my character, what exactly does a summoner do? There seems to be no swords or shields, so I'm not clear how to fight at all.

"I'm leaving it to you, Horikita."

"Me? I'm not doing it.

The swordsman gave up the battle. Or rather, let's say she did not have the spirit to do it in the first place...

"Uwaaa!"

Ike yelled continuously, then Sotomura also screamed.

In a short time their bodies were destroyed and turned into dust.

"What happened?"

"It's probably... being sent somewhere after getting killed?"

"Umu...."

The two wolves gradually approached us, who were still struggling to understand the situation.

They were clearly showing their murderous intent to hunt us.

"In short, it can only be fighting..."

I don't know how a summoner fights, so I simply shortened the distance to give one of the wolves a physical blow.

After being punched, the wolf screamed and was sent flying.

There was a clear feeling on my fist, with a sense of excitement and stimulation.

As I avoided the wolf's sharp teeth, I repeated the punches again.

However, unlike in reality, it doesn't seem to do a lot of damage

This occupation is definitely not a melee type.

I couldn't completely avoid the wolf's counter-attack and received a little bit of damage.

An electrical pain, making zapping sounds, ran through my body

"Not good..."

The situation is obviously unfavorable. Am I going to get killed like Ike if this goes on?

"—I guess it can't be helped then."

Horikita sighed while holding up the sword.

Her stance looked unexpectedly well.

"Ha—!"

Horikita shortened the distance, slashed horizontally, and hit the wolf-shaped monster. Does she have a feel for it? She did wipe out the monster with just a stream of movements. It seems that this game is directly related to physical ability in reality. The other wolf, which was licking its teeth at me, turned to Horikita.

It released a murderous intent even stronger than before, probably because its companion had been down.

Horikita, looking as though she's already a swordmaster, put up a flawless stance.

At the same time as the wolf started charging, she also ran up while keeping her distance from it.

"Sword—slash!"

Horikita shouted out the name of the skill, cutting the wolf apart in a single slash.

".....Beautiful"

I clapped my hands and while I stood up, Horikita let out a breath.

"The body moved on its own. I was made to say something weird involuntarily."

It is probably due to the necessary procedure in the game's programming beforehand to launch the unique kill.

"So how was it? The first RPG experience of your life."

"Well... maybe it's more interesting than I thought."

Horikita seemed to also be interested in the unknown adventure.

Maybe this game will be popular among us for the time being.

"What about Ike-kun and Sotomura-kun?"

"Who knows....."

With this, our wonderful adventure story was born.